

Parker, B. Forthcoming. Feminist Forays in the City: Imbalance and Interventions in Urban Research Methods. *Antipode*

Feminist Forays in the City:  
Imbalance and Intervention in Urban Research  
Methods

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I argue that imbalances and silences persist in urban research. There is insufficient attention to anti-racist and feminist theoretical and epistemological insights. Intersectional and materialist urban analyses that take difference seriously are under-represented, while patriarchy, privilege, and positivism still linger. As a partial and aspirational remedy, I propose a “Feminist Partial Political Economy of Place (FPEP)” approach to urban research. FPEP is characterized by (1) attention to gendered, raced, and intersectional power relations, including affinities and alliances; (2) reliance on partial, place-based, materialist research that attends to power in knowledge production; (3) emphasis on feminist concepts of *relationality* to examine connections among sites, scales, and subjects, and to emphasize ‘life’ and possibility; (4) the use of theoretical toolkits to observe, interpret and challenge material-discursive power relations. My own critique and research centers on North American cities, but FPEP approaches might help produce more robust, inclusive, and explanatory urban research in varied geographic contexts.

**Key words:** urban politics, gender, race, feminist, research methods, black feminist theory, feminist political economy

## Introduction

*I am interviewing a city council member about a contested downtown development project.*

*We've discussed various issues including economics, equity, and his fear about his city remaining a second-tier city forever. Anticipating the bristling I have heard from other interviewees, I gingerly note that there are no women on the city's 15 member council.*

*'Honestly... it doesn't make a bit of difference. Whoever does the job best is what matters,' he replies.*

In this paper, I ask questions about how we might research and render feminist versions of cities and urban politics, recognizing that none of these are stable, unitary concepts. I first argue that certain methods and modes and sites of analysis dominate research on cities and urban politics, creating salient silences and gaps in the literature. In particular, gender, race, and intersecting inequalities remain relevant but often under-explored. Similarly, feminist contributions and modes of analysis are not well integrated into mainstream urban literatures.

To engage with these issues, I draw upon interdisciplinary literatures and a discussion of the epistemological and methodological tightropes I navigated in my own research on gender, race, and neoliberal urban politics in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I share an approach that I label *A feminist partial political economy of place* (FPEP) that calls for reinvigorated intersectional, partial, material, relational and theoretically 'hybrid' analyses of cities and power relations. This FPEP approach might offer insights for urban scholars from different geographical and epistemological locations.

Drawing from historical and current literatures, FPEP has at least four critical dimensions (1) attention to gendered, raced, and intersectional power relations and structures, including affinities and alliances; (2) reliance on partial, place-based, materialist approaches to research that attend to power in knowledge production; (3) emphasis on feminist concepts of *relationality* to examine connections among sites, scales, and subjects and to emphasize ‘life’ and possibility; (4) the use of theoretical toolkits (Wright 2006) to observe, interpret and challenge material-discursive power relations in complex ways.

### **Salient Silences: Gender, Race, and Feminism in Urban Research**

In this section, I discuss why an FPEP approach is needed. I point to some important silences and violences in mainstream urban theory and research. Drawing on feminist and anti-racist scholarship, I suggest that problems of privilege, patriarchy and positivism haunt the ways that cities are built, governed, studied, and represented.

Recent feminist research has suggested that it is time to revisit feminist principles in urban studies and (re) notice sexism and patriarchy and to ‘get angry again’ (e.g. Douglas 2009; Gill 2007; Gill 2011; Valentine, Jackson and Mayblin 2014; Jupp 2014; Peake 2015). Scholars have also demanded that we pay attention (in non-voyeuristic ways) to pressing racial inequalities and violences in cities and urban politics (e.g. Woods 2002; Wilson 2009; McKittrick 2011; Isoke 2013; Derickson 2014). These are not new arguments or a new problem. U.S. and other cities were historically constructed and expanded via colonial domination, racist exploitation, and tumultuous capitalism and patriarchal practices. The ongoing production of urban built environments is contingent upon the production of these complex inequalities (e.g. Fincher 1990;

Domosh 1991; Spain 2004; Brownlow 2009; de Madriaga and Roberts 2013; Isoke 2011; 2013; McKittrick 2011; Derickson 2014).

However, even as patriarchy, privilege and other power relations persists in urban politics and planning, academic attention to these issues has waxed and waned. To give just a few examples, the voluminous literature on creative class politics includes only a handful of articles that address gender and race (e.g. Parker 2008; Leslie and Catungal 2012; McClean 2014). Literature on ‘the new urban politics’ in North American and European contexts also has few such references. In urban political research, a growing literature on gender, race, feminism, and urban neoliberalism is vastly outweighed by mainstream political economic approaches that pay little attention to difference (Mahtani and Roberts 2011; Kern 2010; Wright 2013; Isoke 2013; Derickson 2014). In addition, a growing ‘urban explorer’ culture and literature perhaps perpetuates hypermasculine practices and stereotypes (Mott and Roberts 2014). In U.S. academic urban planning journals and conferences, feminism and gender make rare appearances. This may be connected to an ennui about gender in urban planning and policy in North America and parts of Europe (Burgess 2008). At times, attention to specific inequalities have been superseded by generic emphases on diversity (Rahder and Altilia 2004). A recent European study found that leaving gender out of the title of urban planning sessions made them attractive to attendees (de Madriaga and Roberts 2013).

Dominant patterns in academia also tend to empirically and methodologically skew away from feminist contributions and complex studies of inequality. Historically, positivism, patriarchy, and white privilege produced narrow visions of cities. More recently, perhaps the glaring light on neoliberalism (conceived in capital-centric ways) and ‘global urbanisms’ has overshadowed

other important issues and interventions. Research on urban politics and planning remains largely dominated by men, political economy approaches, and inattention to race, gender, and other power relations (Spain 2002; Parker 2011; Isoke 2013; Peake and Rieker 2013; Wright 2013; de Madriaga and Roberts 2013; Derickson 2015; Peake 2015; Roy 2015).

The result is often narrowed epistemologies, empirics, and erasures in much urban political theory, even as there is a growing emphasis on diversity, contingency, relationality, and assemblage in literatures (McGuirk 2012). Urban political economy approaches have often privileged class inequalities over other forms of oppression, like gender and race. They tend to focus on markets and a narrowly construed state, whereas analytics that attend to everyday life, racialization, gender, subjects and subjectivities, spaces of encounter, the ‘global intimate,’ bodies, households, are marginalized (e.g. Gilroy and Booth; Jupp 2014; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; McKittrick 2011; Isoke 2013). Mainstream political economy may unintentionally reproduce binaries (e.g., material and discursive; public and private; social reproduction and production) or present abstracted theories that are not reflexive, built upon empirical cases, and attentive to subjectivities and complex power relations in cities and research practice (Fincher 1990; McDowell 1991; Rose 1997; Spain 2001; 2004; Driscoll- Derrickson 2009; Peake and Rieker 2013; Isoke 2013; Wright 2013; Peake 2015). Scholars of various stripes have made such critiques. Feminist Geographer Linda Peake (2015) recently asked, ‘where are the *subjects*’ in Global Urbanisms? Sociologist John Walton (1993) has argued that ‘a cocksure analytical style begins to enter the writing in which developed theory is used implicitly to “read off” interpretations for empirical events’ in political economy.

In addition, dominant urban political scholarship can be a form of “everyday racism” (Gilroy 2000; 2013; Holland 2012) and “cultural misrecognition,” where injustices are (re)produced in representation, interpretation, and communication (see Fraser 2013). Cultural misrecognition can include being disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life, but also being silenced in authoritative and scholarly accounts (see Derickson 2015; Fraser 2013). Anti-racist feminists and scholars point out that urban scholarship and politics often rely on liberal notions of a white, male, free subject and are inattentive to everyday and systemic racism (e.g. Lorde 1984; McKittrick 2011; Holland 2012). As Katherine McKittrick, argues (2011), research that does address racism and violence and may naturalize, presume, and perhaps even profit from describing black death, instantiating an us/them framework and trajectory. Much critical urban theory, dominated by privileged white, male, bodies and influenced by Marxist political economy “has done an inadequate job of reckoning in a meaningful way with how its own theories and knowledge production practices are themselves implicated in cultural marginalization and misrecognition.’ (Derickson 2015)

Feminists and anti-racist scholars have critiqued such exclusions, foregone conclusions of political economy, and other types of academic ‘metavision’ (Haraway 1988). They have made diverse contributions from within and outside of political economy that make gendered and intersectional violences and inequalities visible in cities. They have challenged the notion of an urban *flâneur* as a privileged, white, voyeuristic or detached male gazer and interpreter, (Wilson 1991; Wright 2013) even as this subject seems to continually reappear. Epistemologically, feminists have often argued for ‘situated’ and relational knowledges that engage in deep empirical work; clarify the standpoint from which they are produced; blur binaries; engage and make visible the voices and experiences of historically marginalized; and do not make all-inclusive

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claims about knowledge, causality, structure, or the world. (Haraway 1988; hooks 1991; Rose 1997; McKittrick 2006; Domosh 2003; Smith 2005; Driscoll Derickson 2009; Swarr and Nagar 2010; Mohanty 2003; Wright 2013). Katherine McKittrick (2011) has argued for narratives that attend to ‘human life,’ include diverse racial sexual perspectives and politic politicize ‘place–life’ and ‘place–death’ differently (see also Woods 2002).

In spite of these contributions, feminist urban research has its own silences and imbalances, and remains a work in progress. In practice, feminist urban researchers have often, but not always chosen geographic scales like households, bodies, and neighborhoods, and used qualitative, reflexive methods that facilitate sustained contact with research subjects. These strategies may be more amenable to feminist *praxis*—politically engaged, non-exploitative empirical research that reveals and challenges unjust relations (e.g. Rankin 2009; Swarr and Nagar 210). However, in some cases, feminist urban researchers have over-emphasized the ‘situated’ and been reluctant to explore broader causal patterns and generalizations (Fincher 2006). In some cases, feminist urbanists have avoided engagement with structural arguments, and at times Anglo-American feminist geography has insufficiently engaged with the material (di Leonardo 1993; Bondi and Rose 2003). In addition, feminists privileged by race, geography and other power relations sometimes fail to include or credit other voices and perspectives; make claims that don’t match others’ experiences; are hindered by their own privilege; or engage in voyeuristic or violent descriptions (Isoke 2007; 2011; hooks 2001; Mohanty 1988; Roy 2007; Puar 2007; 2011; Richie 2000; McKittrick 2011; Holland 2012).

### **An Intervention: Urban Feminist Partial Political Economies of Place**



The picture I have painted of a crude urban political economy inattentive to feminist contributions, gender, race, and difference versus an overly situated, insufficiently materialist and privileged feminist urban literature perhaps lacks texture and nuance. Nonetheless, it reflects some *actually existing silences, imbalances, and tensions*. As I suggested above, these silences and tensions result from not only methodological and empirical practices and dilemmas within urban research, but also systemic and uneven practices within society and knowledge production. In a humble, and perhaps minor way, a Feminist Partial Political Economy of Place (FPEP) approach engages with these tensions and offers some ways forward within urban research. The FPEP framework is imperfect, but aspirational.

As I described above, an FPEP approach is reflexive, critical, and multivalent. FPEP pays specific attention to gendered and intersectional power relations in cities. With caution and perspective, it attends to material inequalities and structures like patriarchy, racism, heterosexism and capitalism and the ropes that they weave together and unravel. FPEP relies on sustained research and reflexive, partial approaches to knowledge production *in place*. It takes feminist critiques of ‘God-tricks’ and associated epistemic violences seriously; pays attention to power in the research process; and engages with voices of those often marginalized. Not without tensions with the previous point, FPEP draws upon feminist concepts of relationality to look beyond particularities and examine commonalities, structures, and opportunities for intervention. It chooses feminist relational sites and scales for research (including cities) to challenge silences, document specific practices, and reveal the complex, counter-intuitive, and connected spaces where power operates. Finally, FPEP engages a theoretical toolkit (Wright 2006) in order to observe, interpret and challenge material-discursive power relations in complex and revealing ways. In my own research, this includes black feminist theory and a hybrid materialist feminism

that draws from anti-racist and radical feminism as well as post structural emphasis on meaning, subjectivity, and discourse (Naples 2003). Connected to this theoretical toolkit, an FPEP framework enrolls multiple feminist lenses and techniques, including but not limited to studying the body as a site of resistance to urban politics; probing gendered, raced, and neoliberal discourses in cities; and studying marginalized women's everyday lives as a lens into the state and structures of power.

In the sections below, I put flesh on these four dimensions of an FPEP approach, imposing somewhat false separations in order to make for a readable 'recipe.' In each section, I explore the broader tenet of the FPEP approach and then discuss surrounding tensions and literatures. I then give examples of how each tenet was applied in my own research project on power and urban politics in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The Milwaukee research project and the FPEP approach are examples of 'slow scholarship' (Mountz et al., 2015), in the sense that they were stretched out over time, and benefitted from exchange and collaboration with scholars and activists. The research project first took shape a decade ago, when I was a graduate student in Wisconsin wanting to challenge on-the-ground inequalities and mainstream narratives of urban politics. It entailed several years of field work and eventually a book manuscript. Like all research, it has been shaped by my academic and political proclivities and my relational history, emotions, positionalities and research encounters. These are partially represented by words like whiteness, motherhood, anger, uncertainty, academia, justice, trauma, gender, risk, privilege, killjoy, collectivity, and transformation. I have especially grappled with how to study and challenge racial and intersecting inequalities as a white woman. In this and other regards, the FPEP approach represents my efforts to go beyond

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reflexivity toward improved politics and practice. Thus, the FPEP approach and draws upon insights of research participants, activists, and scholars.

### ***Studying Gender, Race, and Intersectionality in Cities***

In this section, I argue that gender, race, and other power relations are relevant but often neglected in urban political theory and practice. Briefly, I present research to support this argument, and then discuss the importance and complexity of studying multiple, intertwined power relations and forms of difference (intersectionality). I ground this discussion with examples and dilemmas from my own research.

As I argued above, U.S. and global gendered inequalities are continually challenged and remade, but persist. With variation, certain men and certain types of masculinities hold material power and authority and discursive ‘value,’ with seeming consequence. In U.S. cities, women hold less than 20 percent of city council and Mayoral positions. Alec Brownlow demonstrated how patriarchal leadership misrepresented rape statistics in a New Jersey city, intentionally putting women at risk in order to enhance economic development. In an examination of urban politics and condominium development in Toronto, Leslie Kern (2010, 201) showed patriarchal relations persist in the neoliberal city via "property relations, security features and promotion of consumption-oriented roles for women; none of which fundamentally challenges traditional domestic or public women." In her study of urban politics in Newark, Isoke (2013, 126-127) found that even leadership by African American males had not disrupted the city's heteropatriarchal governance structure in Newark, which was described by activists as “non-democratic,” “hostile,” “despotic” and even more shocking, “a contemporary vestige of slavery.” Neoliberal and urban discourse and policies continue to valorize masculinized, elite, white

subjectivities and concepts like competition and autonomy instead of care and connection.

Associated patterns of resource allocation follow (e.g. Kingfisher 2006; McDowell 2004; Parker 2008; Wilson 2009; Brownlow 2009; Kern 2010; Isoke 2011; Parker, forthcoming). In my research in Milwaukee, social reproduction (broadly defined) and ‘gendered’ topics like child care, female headed household poverty, and infrastructures of everyday life rarely received attention and resources from the city’s all-male city council. Informal and exclusive decision-making among developers and city leaders was common, who would sometimes walk arm-in-arm into meetings. For this reason, Milwaukee’s leading redevelopment organization was referred to as ‘an old boy’s club.’ In a city that caricatured welfare recipients as lazy dependents, the media praised developers as independent redemptive risk takers, even as they secured millions in subsidies and cheap property from the state.

Additional urban inequalities exist. Even as white women’s education and earnings increase in cities, men retain valued positions in terms of prestige, pay, and power. Female identifying persons are harassed on transportation and experience intimate violence at alarming rates (Whitzman 2013). Racialized violences of the state and prison industrial complex are made more pernicious by gendered violence and the targeting of queer sexuality (Richie 2012). Globally, women are more likely than men to be poor in cities; and women make up 2/ 3 of the U.S. minimum wage work force (Collins and Mayer 2010; Shriver and Center for American Progress 2014). In the recent U.S mortgage crisis fueled by markets and the male-dominated finance sector, women lost considerable wealth (Baker 2014). African-American women of all income groups fared the worst. They were 256 percent more likely to receive subprime loans (and experience foreclosure) than men (Mother Jones, August 1, 2013). Overall, via global neoliberalism and increasing urbanization, women’s

overall burdens of paid and unpaid work have intensified, even as some women's lives improved (e.g Nagar et al., 2002; Gilmore 2007; Walby 2011; Isoke 2013; Runyan and Peterson 2014)

Even as gender, race, and other forms of power appear causal and circumstantial in urban politics, their analysis is sorely lacking in urban political literature. As I suggested above, indifference or inattention often characterizes mainstream urban political scholarship. From more friendly corners, feminist, postcolonial and other critical scholars have critiqued gendered analyses that rely on binary categories like women and men, and noted uneven and unique experiences *among* women. Some have argued for categorical deconstruction and a broader focus on *difference* in urban planning and scholarship. These sentiments are related to a deep political critique of feminism as a white, western, elite project that has not mobilized around pressing inequalities related to colonialialism, race and ethnicity, citizenship, and sexuality, for example (Mohanty 1988; Crenshaw 1989; Swarr and Nagar 2010; McKittrick 2006; 2011; Holland 2012). Unfortunately, these nuanced and important arguments may be co-opted by non-feminist academics; neoliberalism and other projects hostile to feminism, while gender and race remain a lived reality and intersectionality often lies unexamined (e.g Crenshaw 1989; Cordova 1993; Walby 2011; Jarvis 2009; Jupp 2014; Peake 2015).

Therefore, an FPEP approach argues for reinvigorated diverse analyses of gendered and raced governance and other inequalities in cities. Persistent omissions and resistance make this agenda more urgent, while we might also recognize limitations in extant feminist practices, engage with important critiques, and embrace polyvalent studies of urban disparities. There remains a need to engage with both *individual and intersectional structures of power in cities*, as Valentine (2007) argues "...we must not lose sight of the fact that the specific social structures of patriarchy,

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heteronormativity, oralism and so on that so preoccupied feminists of the 1970s still matter.’

She calls for feminist geography to reengage with structural inequalities, while retaining a concern for multiple categories and structures (Valentine 2007, 19)

An FPEP approach responds to this critique. It recognizes that power falls upon and is articulated, embraced and resisted differently by different bodies and institutions. As Black and Chicana feminists first articulated years ago, urban experiences of gentrification, work, migration, state violence, and incarceration are all mediated by race, gender, geography, sexuality, class, ethnicity and citizenship, and life stage for example (e.g. Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Puar 2007; Fincher and Jacobs 1998; Bondi 2001; Gilmore 2007; McDowell 2008; McKittrick 2011; Richie 2000; 2012). As I explore below, in U.S. cities, race—often in conjunction with neighborhood geography— affects every facet of life and associated outcomes, including income, health, education, and exposure to the prison industrial complex.

However, interlocking power relations and their cumulative interactions can be difficult to observe and impossible to tangle apart, especially as lived experiences or identities. Inequality takes different forms in different cities even where economic conditions seem to be similar (McCall 2005; McDowell 2008). Categories like race and gender are not stable but socially produced, unmoored, and maintained through practices that operate at and across different temporal and spatial scales (Puar 2005; McKittrick 2006; 2011). Thus, conducting ‘intersectional’ research that examines multiple power relations and forms of difference is important, but fraught with difficulty in practice and characterized by controversy (e.g, Crenshaw 1989; Cordova 1993; Puar 2005; McKittrick 2006; 2011; Holland 2012; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013). For example, should we focus on difference between or among categories? Does

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our research flatten or fragment social experience as we either collapse social categories or try to list or add them (Russell 2007)? Does an intersectionality approach ‘fix’ power relations, assume permanence or deny the performativity of identity (Puar 2005; Holland 2012)? (For various discussions of intersectionality, see McCall 2005; Puar 2005; Valentine 2007; Russell 2007; McDowell 2008; Isoke 2013; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013).

### *Intersectionality Applied*

There are no simple solutions to studying intersectionality (or assemblages--a more fluid term preferred by some black queer feminists), and myriad approaches remain necessary. My own research exemplifies some dilemmas and difficulties. Seeking to extend research on ‘neoliberal’ politics that focused on capitalism and the state, I explored how race and gender might also be critical structures and relations in Milwaukee’s urban politics. This meant that I critically employed categories like race and gender to describe inequalities and exclusions (e.g. in employment, in electoral office). Importantly, my use of categories emphasized the social constructed and diffuse and differentiated structures of power more than *specific identities* (see Crenshaw 1991; Puar 2007; Holland 2012; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013; McCall 2014). As Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin observe, (2013) “Intersectionality primarily concerns the way things work rather than who people are.” In other words, categories don’t always capture the complex reality of lived experiences and shouldn’t be presumed stable. However, they can reflect and challenge some elements of real structural privilege, power, and collective resistance in cities—the social reality of categorization (Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2014). For example, the political movement titled ‘black lives matter’ has been effective in naming and resisting violences against black people in United States.

I captured some complexity of power relations in Milwaukee by conducting discourse analysis, lengthy qualitative interviews and participant observation with people of different races, genders, and in different positions (e.g. activists; elected officials; low-income residents). Among other things, my whiteness, currently but not always middle-class status, and pregnant female body affected my research access, observations and interpretations. I observed how ‘creative class’ efforts in Milwaukee focused on ‘attracting diverse individuals to Milwaukee,’ even though the city was majority African-American. In this case, urban elites and young professionals performed a kind of classist, ‘banal multiculturalism’ that professed tolerance while practicing exclusion (Thomas 2011). Through qualitative interviews, I explored ways that people in Milwaukee engage with relational material-discursive power relations in their daily lives. For example, several African-American female interviewees articulated to me a rejection neoliberal discourses about work and responsibility that framed them as ‘good mothers’ only when they worked outside of the home for welfare wages. Activists challenged the city’s neoliberal development plan by proposing that community benefits like good wages, jobs for minority residents, and affordable housing be attached to the downtown development agreement. Not without internal conflict and colonialist sentimentalities, feminists, inner city churches, and labor unions demanded these goods by declaring ‘this land is our land.’ I situated my research observations in historical context and in reference to broader tenacious trends of segregation, exclusion and incarceration. These strategies helped reveal both the history and traction of certain intersecting inequalities, but also contemporary forms and fluidities (McKittrick 2011). In general, my research challenges theorizations of intersectionality and agency that underestimate the way that structures constrain the capacity of individuals to enact some realities (McDowell 2004; Valentine 2007; Walby 2011; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013).



Scholars agree that researching multiple intersecting power relations in a rigorous and coherent manner remains a vexation. Rather than fail in effort, I made strategic choices in order to analyze and theorize some power relations in partial but meaningful ways, and then drew upon situated and partial approaches to articulate explanations, erasures, and simplifications. For example, I emphasized gender and race in U.S. politics to respond to some silences in the literature and to ‘follow’ salient material patterns of inequality in the Milwaukee region. Throughout my research, I captured some additional, related forms of difference and power, such as heteronormativity, social class, and geography. With regard to race, my empirical encounters shed the most light on the experiences of African-Americans and Whites. I did not always attend to complex and layered race relations in Milwaukee. This was partly a strategic choice to challenge particularly stark inequalities, with poverty, incarceration, and infant mortality rates 3-10 times higher for African Americans than Whites in Milwaukee. It was also a somewhat unintentional product of the sites, organizations, and spaces with which I engaged.

Although asking broader questions about gendered and raced governance and diverse people’s lives, I often used binary categories like women and men to describe actors; populations, and related exclusions in Milwaukee. There is limitation and loss: In describing a lack of ‘women’ in urban power networks, for example, I sometimes reinscribed gender dichotomies and erased nuance, even as I pointed to the marginalization of particular voices and related resource allocation. Explorations of different gender variations, disability, age, ethnicity, sexuality and certain complexities of real experience went underexplored. However, my book illuminates with detail some of the temporally and spatially specific (but sticky) raced and gendered power relations in Milwaukee and related practices and mechanisms. I also pointed out how these

relations were ideological, discursive and material. The book shows how masculinist ideas about competition and markets dominated official city discourse and action, while notions of care and cooperation were often marginalized. I demonstrated how racial and class privilege were reproduced and circulated in ‘creative class’ and ‘new urbanist’ networks and spaces. Given my own racial privilege, I tried to convey and learn from, via extensive quotes and with the aid of black feminist theory, some African-American women’s lives, sense of place, experiences, and perspectives with some ‘life’ and detail (e.g. Hooks 2001; McKittrick 2006). Admittedly, these efforts were still partial and imperfect. However, through interviews with elites, activists, elected officials and low-income women, a narrative emerged of complex, cumulative and relational oppressions via the state, misogyny, neoliberal capitalism, racialized violence and more. Rather than knowing in advance that any event is just more of the *same* old story about neoliberalism, racism, or patriarchy, I tried to outline specific practices, perspectives, and discourses in Milwaukee with regard to race, gender, and neoliberal capitalism.

It can be valuable for intersectional research to try to sift through how structures of power function in more or less autonomous; synchronous; or contradictory ways, and to consider alliances and affinities (e.g Valentine 2007; Puar 2008; Newman 2012; Fraser 2013; Jupp 2014; Prugl 2014; Cro, Crenshaw and McCall 2013). Rather than presume particular relationships, I empirically found that neoliberalism seems to be reinvigorating masculinities along with markets in Milwaukee, deepening white heteropatriarchal power via policy and practice. But, these relationships were also contradictory and contingent at times. Gendered and raced exclusions were salient during Milwaukee’s Socialist era and remained so during its neoliberal phase. They were also evident in contemporary ‘progressive’ politics, with feminists sometimes silencing agendas and terms that were perceived as ‘unpopular.’ City leaders and business elites

seemed willing to sacrifice profits in order to protect racial and masculinized relationships.

Affinities and contradictions related to patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity and global capitalism in cities need further examination, in part because they reveal openings for activist intervention and offer more thorough forms of explanation. This type of analysis offers some counterbalance to political and academic tendencies to ‘blame’ neoliberalism for all urban ills and injustices.

### ***Partial, Place-Based, Materialist Approaches: How can Feminists Think in and Beyond Cities?***

If trying to study complex power relations raises epistemological and methodological questions, so too does thinking in and beyond place. In this section I discuss the FPEP approach to ‘partial’ knowledge. It challenges epistemic violences, where, for example, all city stories are the same, certain lives are erased or reduced, or all futures already known. Partial approaches to knowledge grounded *in place* are essential. There is value in conscious, if imperfect reflexivity, sustained contact with research subjects and deep, contextualized feminist empirical work and ethnography, as many feminist scholars have advocated. Attention to spatial and temporal difference and flexibility with gendered and other analytic frames used in urban politics is important (Jupp 2014). However, an FPEP approach challenges an overly-situated approach, drawing on materialist theories and arguing with Ruth Fincher (2006, 23) that feminist geography should move beyond its ‘clear aversion to generalizing causes beyond the particular context.’ Feminists and anti-racists have made strides toward justice through less situated claims, like the ‘personal is political,’ ‘black lives matter,’ ‘views from the ‘margins have value’ and ‘intersectional power relations shape life experiences.’ These claims helped produce more thorough and explanatory empirical work and forms of resistance. Importantly, such claims often come via contextualized, reflexive, and

geographically and theoretically diverse research projects, and have often been shaped by those marginalized by class, gender, ethnicity, race, or other power relations. These claims remain open to challenge, clarification, scrutiny and revision.

*Partial, Place-Based and Materialist Approaches to Knowledge Applied*

My own field work was empirically grounded and locally situated, exploring multiple processes of power in one place, Milwaukee. I wanted to carefully represent my research subjects and sites, not breathlessly characterize them with a sweep of a hand. As such, I worked with community-based organizations and activists to learn about pressing issues and perceptions. I spoke to low-income, African-American women interviewees—some who were activists and some who were ordinary residents—about their lives, labors, and surrounding complex power relations. Some women stated they might prefer to tolerate abuse from their boyfriend than to go to the police and risk state violence or his incarceration. In their own words, they spoke about what scholars might call neoliberalism or a crisis in capitalism as *nothing new*, but rather a pattern of ongoing racist exclusion and neglect by the state. Through this, they created their own spaces of care and connection, especially through material and non-material practices of religion. To understand these experiences and to push against limits of my whiteness, perceptions and limited self-reflexivity, I engaged with black feminist theory. In other parts of my research, I attended events and interviewed leaders of an organization intent on cultivating and attracting the ‘creative class’ to Milwaukee. These research exchanges revealed some of the ways that raced and classed creative class subjectivities were produced and performed, as Milwaukee tried to eschew its history as a ‘beer and bratwurst’ town. These and other research insights, admittedly incomplete, depended both on interviewees’ willingness to speak with me and relational, qualitative research in place.

Yet, many such experiences and power relations are repeated and embedded in many spaces, places, and scales. Compared to some situated knowledge approaches, the FPEP partial framework is decidedly *material*, and not averse to charting causes and making careful connections. Deep structures—relational and malleable—including neoliberal capitalism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and racism, shape urban life in common, if nebulous and contested ways (see Fincher 2006; Walby 2011; Gill 2010; Richie 2012). Referring to political economy, urban anthropologist Michaela de Leonardo argues (1993, 79-80), ‘we feminists should not leave home without it,’ a position I embrace. She cautions that feminists too often reject political economy frames via synecdochic critiques rather than strategically embracing, reappropriating them, or using them alongside other theories (see also McDowell 1991; Wright 2013; Joseph 2013). I used the tools of feminist historical materialism to understand Milwaukee’s adoption of market-based development and service provision strategies, without fatalism and the evacuation of agency. I explored the ambivalence of elected officials and the possibilities of diverse community-based efforts and narratives that declared ‘this land is our land.’ I tried to study ‘spaces of encounter’ that makes visible anti-colonial or anti-capitalist practices rather than completed spaces of racism, as Ruthie Gilmore effectively does (McKittrick 2011). Or, as feminist queer theorist Miranda Joseph (2013) argues, we might have ‘determination without the last instance.’ My research also suggested that the popularity of creative class urban politics should be understood not just as neoliberal accumulation, but through its performance of and affinities with gendered, heteronormative, and raced discourses and inequalities.

Among other strengths, critically interrogated materialist frames can take difference causally and seriously, put ethnography in larger contexts, and chart and challenge pervasive inequalities. These approaches are essential because persistent capitalist, racist, heteronormative, and patriarchal

policies and structures continue to create uneven geographies and amplify despair in many cities, although in clever and sometimes unpredictable ways. Neoliberal capitalism, working through and with other inequalities, has wreaked much devastation. Gendered heteronormative structures produce violence and uneven work burdens. Racism in the United States is insidiously embedded in all social, cultural, and economic life (Omi and Winant 1994); and relational violences have and continue to produce a condition of being black that is predicated on struggle (McKittrick 2011). In Milwaukee and elsewhere, whiteness serves as marker of privilege by which multiple conceptions of race are situated and constructed as ‘others,’ and gendered and racial violence is legitimated and sustained (Pulido 2000; Wilson 2009; Richie 2012). In Milwaukee, African-American women in Milwaukee and throughout the United States are currently the most likely group to be poor; die from intimate violence; and experience precarities related to housing and health (e.g. Hill Collins 2001; Jones 2009; Richie 2012). As black queer feminists articulate, such inequalities are deeply rooted in slave history and not simply about racism capital accumulation, but also eroticism, encounter and colonial imaginations and histories (e.g. Holland 2012). We might engage a ‘black sense of place’ that “materially and imaginative situates historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter.” (McKittrick 2011, 950).

In the years that I researched Milwaukee; heteropatriarchal governance strategies stubbornly dominated (see Isoke 2013). The rich mainly stayed rich; and racialized poverty persisted. Even as some of Milwaukee’s most marginalized residents contested political discourses and inequalities and created homescapes of connection, resistance, and activism (also see Isoke 2011), their lives and neighborhoods remained marked by multiscalar and uneven violences. Partial, place-based strategies of research and resistance that take fluidity, contingency and spaces of encounter

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seriously are vital, but so is artfully moving beyond them to chart and challenge persistent and uneven systems in historical, imaginative and materialist ways.

### ***Relational Research: Making Connections Across Subjects, Spaces, and Scales***

While not completely resolving tensions, *relationality* is a strategy to that helps recognize the politics of location and power of agency but perhaps not be trapped in “defeatism and isolationism of forever partial and situated knowledges” (Walby 2000, 194). In this section, I first define relationality and its’ potential value for urban research. I then point to some examples and techniques for conducting relational work. I suggest that a relational lens can be applied to the subjects, sites and scales selected and analyzed in an FPEP approach, using examples from my own research.

Employing varied terms and metaphors, feminists and anti-racists have argued for relational research that maps links across different sites and scales to recognize difference, human life, common oppressions, and opportunities for activist interventions (e.g Katz 2004; Smith 2005; Gilmore 2007; McDowell 2001; Naples 2003, Swarr and Nagar 2010; Wright 2009; Walby 2011; McKittrick 2011). As argued earlier, this contrasts with much urban political research, which often privileges the study of markets, elite actors, and a narrowly construed state—failing to connect them to bodies, households, and everyday life, and also ignoring their gendered, raced and sexualized dimensions (e.g. Nagar et al., 2002; Marchand and Runyan 2010; Mountz and Hyndman 2006).

Relational research helps one explore how gender inequalities are both locally and globally constructed, how racialized experiences might be connected across space, how hybrid hegemonies and agencies are intertwined in shaping institutions and life experiences in various

locations. Relationality takes seriously ‘spaces of encounter.’ (McKittrick 2011). Long used by feminists to critique overly-economistic, individualist, rational theories and practices, relationality as a concept reminds us of the connected nature of the human and non- human, and of places, practices, and power. Ruthie Gilmore’s (2007) work on race and incarceration provides a powerful example of relationality:

The text references rely on and infuse prison expansion with human life, kinship, and survival: being locked in and being locked out are two sides of the same coin... Gilmore’s insistence on human relationality, rather than bifurcated systems of dispossession and possession, provides an important pathway into thinking through and with prison expansion, for it is relationality that humanizes, and populates labour shortage, idle land, unemployment, activism, political manoeuvres, reproduction, households, work, legal documents, capital, as these spaces and social processes underwrite the making of prison life... Put differently, we might re-imagine geographies of dispossession and racial violence not through the comfortable lenses of insides/outside or us/them, which repeat what Gilmore (2007, 241) calls ‘doomed methods of analysis and action’, but as sites through which ‘cooperative human efforts’ can take place and have a place (McKittrick 2011, 958-959).

Urbanists too, drawn on relationality, calling for multiscalar analysis of various phenomena; with scale a fluid, evolving process produced through contestation (e.g. Brenner 2001; Marston 2004; Ward 2010). Rather than simply a fixed geography, cities might be seen as assemblages; as unbounded sites and processes organized with and through broader social and political practices and institutions, and as sites of broader subject formation (e.g. Massey 1999; Robinsin 2011; Rodgers, Barnett and Cochrane 2014; Hoffman 2014). Cities, experiences, and all relations are ultimately ‘embeddedness in multiple elsewheres’ (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004, 348). Via relationality and relational comparative urban research, one might analyze distinct, but not isolated causal phenomena and social relations surrounding cities and urban politics.

Conducting relational feminist urban analyses that foreground human life and make connections across and in scales, times, and places, however, is not simple. It pertains to research techniques,



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site selection, and analysis and data analysis, to name a few. In addition to strategies described above, feminists and feminist geographers have experimented with varied metaphors and techniques, such as Cindi Katz' (2004) topographies based on thick descriptions of social relations, material practices and constructions of meaning in different geographical contexts; and Pratt and Rosner's (2006) explorations of the global intimate. Within a broader study of local and national heteropatriarchal urban politics, Isoke (2013) explores subjectivities and social spaces produced or claimed by black women, including home spaces of caring and connection. (See also see Nast 1994; Katz 1994; McDowell 2001; Katz 2001; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Wright 2006; Gilmore 2007; Isoke 2011; Mountz 2011).

### *Relational Research Applied*

The strategies above formed a pathway for my own research, which was also informed by *institutional ethnography* and discourse analyses strategies of Dorothy Smith (1990; 2005) and Nancy Naples (2003) and Michael Buroway's extended case method (2000). According to Smith (2005), empirical research of marginalized women's daily lives is a critical endeavor that provides questions, answers, and explanations about broader policies, power, and institutions. Institutional ethnography also provides insight into how dominant relations of ruling (in knowledge production, texts, policies, and acts) help structure the 'everyday worlds' and perceptions of individuals living with them. These relational ethnographies of lives can reveal how people in one place are aligned with activities and relevances elsewhere.

Sociologist Michael Buroway offers a relational research technique that articulates well with a feminist political economy of place. In his extended case method, Buroway (2000) suggests four *extensions* that produce reflexive understandings of social processes and power. In Milwaukee, I

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ethnographically extended into the lifeworlds of participants. I sat in churches, in homes, in City Hall, and in hip brewpubs, interviewing Milwaukee's elites, activists, and residents, drawing upon feminists' insights about power and praxis qualitative research. I extended across time and space, researching Milwaukee's history as a Socialist city 100+ years ago, the transition toward a 'modern, masculinized, marketized city' after World War II, and a recent incarnation as a hotbed of new urbanism. Relationally and conceptually, I extended to place Milwaukee politics amidst broader trends like deindustrialization, and backlashes against civil rights and feminism. I considered how the micro-politics of exclusion in City Hall meetings or caring for a sick child are connected to macro-processes like sexism and neoliberalism. Finally, with the help of materialist feminism and black feminist theory, I methodologically and empirically extended mainstream renderings of urban politics.

Perhaps unexpectedly, I chose a single, entire city as my primary research site. On one hand, there has been a recent call among urban theorists (feminist and other) for reinvigorated and even relational comparative urban research, especially spanning supposed north/south divides (e.g. Ward 2010; Robinson 2011; Peake and Rieker 2013). Single case studies of cities might be seen as *too* particular and *too* local; or reinforce divides like Global North and Global South. On the other hand, some feminists might counter that a study of Milwaukee, understood in unbounded ways, could not be partial or situated enough. Feminist urban research has often focused on neighborhood scales or only in households or with particular groups of women, a valuable strategy. However, I would argue that there is a currently a place and a need for feminist citywide analysis, and even deep single (though relational and embedded) case studies. Cities have too often been built; theorized; and narrated by non-feminists (e.g., Fincher 1990; Wilson 1991; McDowell 1991; Spain 2001; Domosh 2003; Jarvis 2009; Kern 2010; Peake and Rieker 2013;

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Wright 2013; Isoke 2013). Foundational monographs of cities and urban politics (in diverse geographies and from varied theoretical persuasions) may give the impression that race, gendered or other power relations are irrelevant. Many obscure a variety of scales and encounters of urban life, and they may be entirely devoid of subjects (Peake 2015). Feminist studies of cities that are deep, wide, and relational, if not strictly comparative, have been and continue to valuable additions to the literature. These relational contributions might counter a tendency to produce ahistorical or overly synthetic renderings in strictly comparative analysis (e.g. Robinson 2011); and might later be joined or converted into contextualized, multi-scalar, relational, intersectional comparative analyses.

My work also helped reveal how gendered, raced, heteronormative, and capitalist power relationally *pervade* urban politics and practices; and simultaneously operate in multiple and connected sites and material-discursive ways across time in one city. By conducting four embedded case studies in the city along with historical analysis, I could (imperfectly and partially) map gendered, raced, heteronormative, and neoliberal practices and *unfix* synthetic notions about where and how they operated and mattered (e.g., not just in households but also in progressive movements). As I argued in the opening section of this paper, this remains an important task for contemporary feminist research.

Of course, selecting relational research sites and spaces for inquiry is not simply about choosing between one or two or three cities. I selected Milwaukee because of its status as an ‘ordinary’ city. It also had a unique history of experimentation in urban politics, including an early, eager embrace of neoliberal politics like school privatization and welfare reform under an ideological Mayor. Milwaukee was also home to progressive urban politics, including labor and feminist

activism. But I struggled with what and who to study and where to locate myself as a researcher in the city. Guided by my FPEP approach, I tried to select sites, or embedded cases, that would not reproduce or dichotomize gendered concepts (e.g. the global as masculine; the local as feminine; the household as the place where gendered practices happen; ‘activism’ as only predefined public acts). Using relational strategies, I drew upon feminist and black feminist perspectives on embodiment, social reproduction, and subaltern spaces and subjectivities to study low-income, racialized women’s lives and their experiences with and resistance to state, racism, capitalism and gendered violence. I analyzed contemporary creative class and new urbanist discourses, subjectivities, politics and practices, considering who and what they reify and erase. I studied an unfolding downtown development project and the labor-inner city church-feminist-environmentalist community coalition that contested it, noting encounters of possibility and exclusion. In this way, I called upon specific and partial knowledges, spaces and scales, but also made connections across them to try to maintain a feminist perspective on the city writ large.

### ***Theoretical Toolkits for Urban Research***

An FPEP framework emphasizes not only relational research, but also hybrid approaches to studying material-discursive power relations. In this section, I consider how feminists have used theoretical toolkits and its associated merits. I then provide examples of how I applied diverse theoretical perspectives in my own fieldwork.

Much feminist research takes a somewhat singular theoretical approach, interrogating gendered subjectivities or documenting survival strategies of low-income women amidst global neoliberalism. Feminists might define their work as primarily ‘poststructural,’ or ‘postcolonial.’ In contrast, and drawing inspiration from scholars like Melissa Wright (2006) and Linda

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McDowell (2008), an FPEP framework advances the use a theoretical ‘toolkit’ that draws upon complementary epistemological traditions and methods.

While not without limitations, the thoughtful use of hybrid ‘theoretical toolkits’ (Wright 2006) can add value to an FPEP approach and other research in at least two intertwined ways. The first, to be frank, is persuasive. Perhaps fruitlessly, I hope that showing varied stories, examples, and processes of pernicious gendered, raced, capitalist and other practices might capture the interest of sundry scholars and non-scholars. Amidst some academic antipathy about the relevance and causal role of gendered and raced power in cities and urban politics, perhaps writing in different registers and theories can attract a broader audience.

Second, diverse theoretical tools can produce sharper, fuller observations and explanations. They can chart sometimes subterranean power relations, along with opportunities for activist intervention. Anti-racist scholars have articulated structural and ‘everyday’ forms of racism in cities manifested in discursive and material forms (e.g. Gilroy 2000; 2012; Holland 2012).

Feminists like Liz Bondi (2005) note that gender operates in several ways in cities, including embodied experiences related to perceived identity attributes; a social relation and organizing element in which the structures, functions and regulations of cities are shaped; and a performance of behaviors or scripts that are often taken for granted and are routinely enacted. Yet, people often underestimate or are unable to acknowledge gendered, raced, and other power-exerting behaviors, biases and patterns, in part because of their privilege (e.g. Harding 1993; Hill Collins 2001; Smith 2005; McKittrick 2011). Patterns of willingly ‘unseeing’ can be connected to practices that undermine opposition, and to aversions to feminism described earlier in the paper. Feminists, anti-racists, queer theorists and others are sometimes seen as ‘killjoys,’ taking the

solidarity and even fun away from social relations, social movements or scholarship (see Ahmed 2013; Parker, forthcoming). Thus, one often has to use multiple techniques of observation, analysis, interpretation and communication to study and engage audiences with topics like feminism, heterosexism, and racism.

### *Theoretical Toolkits Applied*

My study of Milwaukee was in part, a ‘map-making’ strategy, showing, but not subsuming, the variously located and intersecting activities that coordinate and reproduce oppressive systems (see Naples 2003). The research revealed how gender, race, and other power relations are materially and discursively threaded through various sites and scales—from new urbanist developments to community activist projects to the bodies of the purportedly creative class—often in banal ways (Gilroy 2000). I found that urban *subjectivities*, *texts*, and *discourses* in Milwaukee and beyond tended to valorize masculinities, whiteness and related notions of competition; efficiency and autonomy and impose associated rules and practices in cities. They also devalued care; connection; femininities, social reproduction; feminism; and racialized women. Institutions, states, political economies and individuals often oppress female; female-identifying, racialized bodies and neighborhoods via exclusion, dispossession, silencing, microaggressions, violence, incarceration, and failure to allocate resources. These power relations were not totalizing, as feminists, activists, and organizations contested and created alternative spaces and enacted forms of power. I observed unlikely allies mobilize to propose public housing and jobs for low-income, minority residents. As Ruthie Gilmore argued, ‘co-operative human efforts’ can take place and have a place (Gilmore 2007, 214). A diverse theoretical toolkit helped me observe and articulate these and other material-discursive power relations and revealed some current and future possibilities for activist interventions.

The use of theoretical toolkits and a feminist commitment to reflexivity can add value to the urban literature via an implicit willingness to learn from and engage with other knowledges and encounters. Over years, my own feminist political economy approach expanded as I grappled with intersectional and racialized politics, discourses, and the experiences of my interviewees, leading me to more deeply explore black feminist theories; critical race theories; and governmentality approaches, to name a few. Rather than stay stickily mired in our own theoretical camps, we can benefit from flexibility, fluidity, and collaboration to help us map, match and challenge the shifting and wily ways that power operates in cities.

## **Conclusion**

There are now productive and provocative bodies of research on urban politics and planning, yet some imbalances and silences persist. The space for further feminist, anti-racist, and other critical contributions that emphasize materialism and take differences seriously remains vast. Some of this work lies with mainstream urbanists, who have yet to draw fully upon insights from diverse feminisms or pay fuller attention to complex urban power relations and how they structure space. Feminists too, might engage more with theoretically diverse, intersectional, anti-racist, materialist and multiscalar analyses of cities that are still partial, reflexive and attentive to power relations and praxis. Such strategies are necessary, alongside and in conversation with other radical, caring, and critical imaginations, in order to comprehend and challenge uneven productions of urban space.

In this paper I have articulated an aspirational feminist political economy of place (FPEP) approach that is especially informed by feminist materialism and black feminist theory. An FPEP

approach pays attention to gender, race, and other forms of difference in intersectional, relational, and theoretically diverse ways. Partial and grounded in place, it charts causality and challenges structures. In my own research, an FPEP approach helped me make connections among the daily life experiences of low- income racialized women; gendered governance practices; urban development projects and contestations; and discourses about what cities should be and whom they are for. It helped me frame an explanatory feminist rendering of intersectional relations of ruling in Milwaukee and beyond—a version that reinforces some existing conceptions, but may dismantle and challenge others. In line with my ‘partial’ approach, this paper focused mainly on Milwaukee, U.S. cities, and surrounding urban theories and research. An FPEP approach is suitable to other geographies as well. It offers a structure with fluid content, as the types of intersecting power studied, the specific relational strategies and sites selected, and the theoretical tools enrolled can be tailored to the researcher and the research site. Given sustained and sufficient attention to complexity and content, an FPEP approach might also be used to conduct needed comparative urban research.

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