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*Book Review Essay: Feminist City: A Field Guide*¹

Lisa Sharik²

In feminist urban geographer Leslie Kern's latest work, *Feminist City: A Field Guide*, her poignant and accessible writing style immediately captures the reader's attention. Not only is the reader able to visualize Kern's experiences – from risky choices made in adolescence to struggling with a stroller on slushy city sidewalks, and subways – but to also to feel the emotions reverberating through Kern as she relives and reflects on her experiences. Throughout her method of self-reflection, Kern effortlessly blends her lived experiences in urban spaces with relevant research findings and case studies helping to substantiate her experiences as well strengthen her ideas for change. Kern also takes the time to highlight the limitations of her proposals for future, feminist changes to cities, an incredibly honest and refreshing inclusion to her work.

Oftentimes, when researchers fail to take into consideration how their proposals for change will play out in the real world, valuable insight is lost. In Kern's case when the diversity of the women living and working in cities, along with their experiences is excluded in proposals for urban change, a huge segment of the population is left feeling even more disadvantaged, oppressed and overlooked. Blending feminist intersectionality theory with her own self-awareness and self-reflection, allows Kern to broaden her ability to understand and contemplate her own points of privilege and power. Thus, Kern takes the time to contemplate how her privileges overlap with and inform her experiences as a white, middle-class woman in the city. Feminists refer to this method as situated knowledge production, whereby one's experiences help set the parameters for the text and in essence help to create the text. The latter is precisely what Kern has done in *Feminist City: A Field Guide*.

Utilizing a feminist intersectionality lens while simultaneously self-reflecting, Kern moves through each chapter exploring how gender engages with other social inequalities, namely race, class, sexuality and ability. She also notes how the built urban environments that women live in, actually help to facilitate systems of oppression (17). Kern wonders, how do gender, race, class and ability actually function within (hu)man built urban spaces? Who gets to decide and plan how urban spaces will be mapped out? According to Kern and numerous feminist urban geographers, the making of urban space, that is how cities actually came to be, is an integral part of understanding how and why cities function as they do.

Feminists have long argued that men have been and continue to be the ones responsible for designing and running cities. Kern draws on the works of such feminist geographers as Jane Darke,

¹ Kern, L. (2019). *Feminist City: A Field Guide*. Leslie Kern. Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines.

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who succinctly stated that “Our cities are patriarchy written in stone, brick, glass and concrete” (14). Thus, cities are and have been built by men, for men, with all others, women, elderly, young people, the LGBTQ community and non-Caucasians considered to be secondary citizens if even considered at all (6). Kern also highlights the gendered symbolism that has been built into many cities, whereby buildings such as skyscrapers, long argued by many feminists, including feminist architect Dolores Hayden are phallic symbols. But as Kern and feminist geographers such as Liz Bondi note, skyscrapers and the built environments of cities are also representations of male economic power and privilege which has been an integral part of patriarchal, capitalist societies. Interestingly, as Kern notes, once built, the form of cities continues to shape and influence social relations, power and inequality, which then shapes the range of possibilities for women, and all those who do not fit into the masculine narrative of the city. Consequently, as Kern so aptly states, biases are built and re-built right into cities.

Kern begins her book by providing the reader with a brief, yet succinct, overview of early Victorian cities noting how women's place in the city was largely dependent on their class and race. She highlights the need to protect upper-class, white women who were entering cities for the first time to avoid being mistaken for ‘working women’. With the sudden mixing of social classes and immigrants in cities there came about the notion that privileged women who left the confines of their private/feminine home to embark on shopping trips in the public/masculine space, needed to be protected from real or imagined dangers. The need to protect a certain class and race of women coincided with the need to control working class women and eradicate prostitutes. Interestingly, Kern notes that as women were slowly granted more freedoms to move about cities, this freedom was housed within the long-held belief that not only were they secondary citizens, but their bodies, long thought of as problematic, needed to be controlled. Unfortunately, these beliefs are still, for the most part, true today. Even though women have made great strides over the last century, establishing their place working and living in cities, according to Kern, many women's lives continue to be limited by the patriarchal and social norms that have been built into cities. Although free to move about today, Kern notes that many women still experience limitations to their movements in cities due in part to the daily harassment that they face. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, many women often plan their time in the city in such a way as to avoid possibly dangerous situations. The restriction of movement that many women experience not only refers to the male gaze objectifying their bodies, but also to the social norms that dictate, for example, where it is appropriate for women to breastfeed their infant in public.

Kern is also quick to point out that implementing safety measures that will benefit herself and other white, middle-class women, may simultaneously negatively affect those living in low-income and immigrant neighbourhoods. The possibility of real or imagined risks along with the limitations of movement that many women experience in cities when viewed through an introspective feminist intersectionality lens allows Kern to scrutinize her own lived experiences in urban spaces as well as her proposals for change.

Fittingly, Kern's methods of self-reflection on her own lived experiences in the cities where she has lived, begins with her body, which as Adrienne Rich (1994:216) noted in the 1970's was the place where women needed to start in order to reclaim their bodies. Thus, Kern begins by identifying herself as a white, able-bodied, English speaking, privileged, Canadian who is situated in a successful white dominant urban space. Rich's theorizing leads Kern to situate her questions

as women's (a continually shifting, diverse category) questions which allows her, as well as her readers, to become aware of the particularities of their own body (young body, older body, disabled body, pregnant body, breastfeeding body, trans body, black body, Indigenous body) as it moves through urban spaces. By applying a feminist intersectionality lens while beginning in the body, Kern's questions become deeply self-reflective as she is continually considering what her choices will result in for others based on their race, class, gender and sexuality, as well as what areas she is likely to miss due to her place of privilege. Kern openly asks, what does her white, privileged body - young body, teen body, academic body, pregnant body, breastfeeding body, mother's body - allow her to write and speak about? Her questioning brings her to the place of delving into the meeting point of her body and the cities that she has lived in, namely Toronto, Canada; Mississauga, Canada; and London, UK. By committing to the notion that all knowledge is situated, Kern is quick to note that her urban experiences (e.g., Toronto) and complaints only reflect her own lived experiences and therefore are not reflective of other women living in the same city.

While reflecting on her lived experiences in cities, Kern makes the point of noting her limitations in writing about other cities where she has not experienced urban life. Doing so highlights her commitment to not mapping her own unique Western urban experiences onto women, be it those in the cities she knows or those cities she has never personally experienced, something that often occurs in research. Although Kern uses examples from a wide range of cities (e.g., Seoul, South Delhi, Stockholm, Vienna, Paris) to help situate her own lived experiences and proposals for change, she also notes her limitations of not being able to do justice to Global South and Asian cities, something that she finds is a limitation in feminist urban geography (18). Kern, as a feminist urban geographer is only too aware of the lingering patriarchal, Eurocentric colonial attitudes that still appear in the discipline. In the honesty of her writing, Kern even goes so far as to question her claims to urban space in Canada, a country she is a citizen of, whose lands rightfully belong to Indigenous peoples. She notes that although many white feminist geographers pushed for the inclusion of women into the discipline and as distinct urban subjects, most did not take an intersectionality approach in their work. As Kern and many feminist urban geographers and architects have pointed out, simply adding women to these disciplines and professions will not dismantle the patriarchal society that women live in. Furthermore, doing so often leads to the belief (false) that there is unity amongst women living and working in cities. Thus, change needs to emanate from the ground up, from the lived experiences of diverse groups of women living and working in cities.

Kern's text adds to the diverse body of work that has been published by feminist geographers such as Janice Monk and Susan Hanson (1982) who wrote about the absence of women in the discipline and as subjects, and Gill Valentine (1998) who wrote about her experiences and the experiences of other lesbians in urban spaces. As well Laura Pulido and Audrey Kobayashi (1994), Katherine McKittrick (2006), and Indigenous feminist geographer Sarah Hunt (2015-2016) who all not only look at the experiences of non-Caucasian women within the white dominated discipline of geography, but also the embedded biases that are still often found within research topics, discourses and methods of feminist geographers. As with Kern, these researchers are striving to not only include the experiences and voices of women in urban spaces, but more importantly the experiences and voices of the diverse groups of marginalized women based on race, class, gender, sexuality and ability.

Overall, Kern's writing is both passionate and truthful, in that not only is she committed to using a feminist intersectionality lens when analyzing her own lived experiences in urban cities, she also maintains that commitment when proposing future changes, a rather daunting task. Remaining steadfast to critiquing one's own standpoint is truly commendable; as it is often easier to focus your attention on the action and lives of others, whether considering the past, present or future. Kern provides a great service to readers, be they professors, students, professionals or citizens, by prompting them to reflect on their own lived experiences in urban spaces, which brings forth the notion that change begins with one's self.

References

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