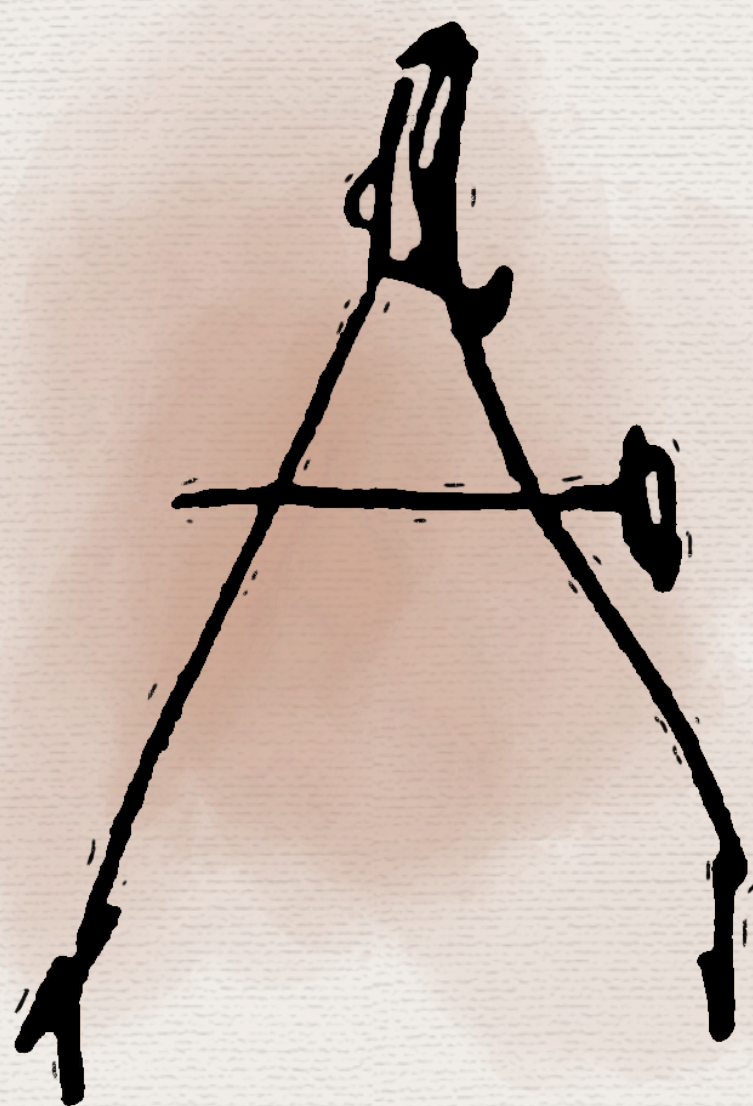

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SEMPLÉ

Navigating a Patriarchal Discipline

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I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone.

- **Margaret Atwood, Surfacing**

Ellen Churchill Semple is a notorious figure in the geographical realm whose complicated legacy renders her place within a historiography of geography uncertain. While Semple is hailed as the first female geographer, it is also widely acknowledged that her work is tainted with racism.¹ Contemporary scholars wish to erase her contributions, declaring that they would “prefer to forget” her infamous text *Influences of Geographic Environment* in which she claimed that physical geography determined human behaviour.² Mona Domosh complicates this desire to erase Semple from memory by advocating for a feminist historiography of geography. Through foregrounding the contributions that women have made to the development of geographic knowledge, Domosh challenges the exclusion of women from accounts of the discipline’s past.³ This paper therefore addresses the question: Should Semple be included in a feminist historiography of geography? Furthermore, was Semple a feminist? To interrogate this, I reimagine Pearson’s take on violent women.⁴ Just as Atwood describes a woman’s disbelief at her ability to cause harm in the opening quote,⁵ Pearson centres the misperception that women are simply compassionate caregivers and victims of their circumstances – the ‘myth of female innocence’.⁶ This is useful for exploring Semple’s role in epistemological violence where her data interpretations brought negative consequences for certain groups.⁷ An intersectional lens is crucial for examining the connections between race, class, and gender which shaped the experiences of Semple and those she deemed ‘inferior’.⁸ The structure-agency debate emerges, asking whether individuals are entirely socialised by structures or can act autonomously.⁹ I take a relational approach to acknowledge the interrelatedness of social processes

and argue that Semple both actively challenged and perpetuated patriarchy. Firstly, this paper outlines Semple’s theoretical contributions and other key insights provided by contemporary female geographers which are useful for assessing Semple’s impact today. Secondly, Semple’s infiltration of male-dominated space is examined to demonstrate her resistance to traditional gender expectations. Thirdly, her imperial entanglements are traced to illustrate her perpetuation of the patriarchal state. Finally, a contemporary manifestation of the Semple dilemma is considered. I conclude that by today’s standards of intersectional feminism Semple is not a feminist role model, however she can be considered an early feminist for her active reconfiguration of an all-male discipline. Ultimately, I advocate for the critical inclusion of Semple’s work in a feminist historiography of geography. This project of decoding knowledge to understand the influence of cultural forces offers a step towards decolonising the academy.

Conceptualising Semple

Semple is primarily known for a theory now referred to as ‘environmental determinism’. Reflecting Charles Darwin’s natural selection and Friedrich Ratzel’s anthropogeography, Semple argued that climate and terrain strongly influenced a population’s social organisation and physical characteristics.¹⁰ Specifically, Semple claimed that populations in the tropics suffered ‘arrested development’, remaining in a child-like state due to extreme heat and subsequent ‘laziness’.¹¹ Semple therefore Othered many groups outside of the West, arbitrarily constructing them as inferior simply because of perceived difference. Othering is a broad term that describes the efforts of a politically dominant group to marginalise and subordinate another group.¹² Beyond extremely problematic stereotyping and Othering, Semple conflated a nation’s success with the acquisition of territory and resources.¹³ She explicitly endorsed U.S.

imperialism, believing that America could make the best use of the frontier and contribute to the “spread of civilisation”.¹⁴ Through justifying the invasions and exploitative processes of late 19th and early 20th century New Imperialism, Semple’s work had undeniably nefarious consequences. Her ideas were adopted by the Nazi Party to justify German territorial expansion and Hitler cited her work in *Mein Kampf* to evidence the ‘inferiority’ of Jewish people.¹⁵ Semple’s theory has been largely rejected as it is now deemed essentialist, imperialist, and pseudoscientific. Considering the harmful practices connected to her narrow and oversimplified interpretations, I argue that Semple participated in epistemological violence and the reproduction of patriarchal imperialism.

Although colonial exploration supported the establishment of the geographic discipline, subsequent transformation has enabled a departure from this.¹⁶ In the late 1980s, geography experienced a reflexive turn where positionality, power relations, language, and representation became of interest. Feminist geography produced significant contributions during this period. Within the sub-discipline, patriarchy is conceptualised as a fundamental socio-cultural structure that renders men and women gendered subjects and ensures male dominance within society.¹⁷ Patriarchy is neither universal nor uniform and can be perpetuated by women. Haraway, a key geographical thinker, distinguishes feminist objectivity from masculine objectivity where the former involves recognising one’s subjective perspective and the latter involves making detached claims about ‘observable truth’.¹⁸ Through introducing ‘situated knowledges’, Haraway argues that truth is multiple and varies based on a person’s socio-political context.¹⁹ This is vital for understanding Semple’s situated perception of ‘truth’. Harding’s ‘standpoint theory’ similarly argues that embodied knowledge gained through

lived experience offers a strengthened version of truth, resulting in ‘strong objectivity’.²⁰ With this in mind, I acknowledge that my position as white and privileged limits my ability to understand the struggles of those Othered by Semple and reflexivity alone does not grant me the right to speak for such groups. Given my shared experience of womanhood with Semple, I centre gender in this paper. Yet I also acknowledge that the oppression I experience today is less restrictive than that of Semple’s time, as patriarchy is ever-changing. Feminist scholars have emphasised that academics have a ‘social responsibility’ to construct and give meaning to the world in a harmless and anti-racist manner.²¹ For Ramphel, feminist scholars should produce integrated analyses that consider intersectionality and incorporate insights from Marxist, liberal, black, anarchist, and radical feminism.²² To be truly ‘relevant’, feminist geographers must carefully consider women’s competing realities with the ultimate aim of empowerment.²³ Semple’s work does not align with the current aims of feminist geography. However, for reasons outlined below, I argue that her work is relevant if it is heavily critiqued and decoded.

Disrupting the Geographical Discipline

Semple defied various patriarchal norms within geography, overcoming concrete barriers to challenge the patriarchy at large. In the late 19th century, it was widely believed that women had no use for higher education considering they could not enter the ministry, practice law or medicine, and were instead restricted to domestic duties.²⁴ Those that were admitted to university received a weaker curriculum, fewer resources, and a strictly segregated education.²⁵ Ultimately, Semple was born in an era when women who wanted to educate themselves faced “hyperbolic condemnation”.²⁶ Yet, as the only woman in a class of 500 men at the University of Leipzig, Semple was a force of resistance.²⁷ Although she was prohibited from

matriculating and denied a PhD, Semple became a founding member of the Association of American Geographers and its first president.²⁸ Newspapers described the “remarkable spectacle of a woman lecturer holding an audience of some of the greatest living scientists spellbound for more than an hour”.²⁹ This review demonstrates that her presence was truly incongruous, and her intelligence considered surprising. Where feminists have expanded the definition of activism to incorporate micro-actions that change power relations,³⁰ I argue that Semple’s infiltration of male-only academic space was a form of feminist activism that provided positive social change for women. For Bushong, Semple’s visibility in the discipline “undoubtedly” contributed to the higher proportion of women earning geography doctorates during her lifetime.³¹ In this regard, Semple was a pioneer.

Beyond mere visibility, Semple’s commitment to expanding female representation in geography was significant and remains celebrated on ‘Annual Ellen Semple Day’ at Vassar College where she first graduated.³² Semple delivered lectures to young women, encouraging them to study geography and once stating that “modern education, which seems to be a big mill especially designed for crushing the imagination, finds a more resistant element in the mind of woman, probably due to her strong emotional nature”.³³ Here, Semple not only celebrated women’s intelligence but also outwardly and unconventionally embraced emotion. This is intriguing as women were, and continue to be, forced into the devalued categories of ‘nature’ and ‘emotion’ as opposed to male ‘culture’ and ‘reason’.³⁴ Though Semple clearly associated women with emotion, she valorised this quality in a way that defied societal norms. Semple further challenged gendered assumptions by participating in physically demanding fieldwork and pursuing a singular observable scientific truth in her work.³⁵

For Haraway, the latter is a masculine endeavour, seeking to provide a view from nowhere.³⁶ Contrastingly, ‘feminist objectivity’ involves multiple views from somewhere, a ‘positioned rationality’.³⁷ This brings forth a debate, where Dœuff argues that femininity does not have to be radically separate from ‘masculine’ rationality as this only reinforces the construction of reason as a masculine trait.³⁸ I align with Dœuff here, arguing that Semple’s positivist approach does not render her less of a feminist. Rather, Semple’s simultaneous identification with male and female dualisms represents a powerful refusal to conform to patriarchal norms. Additionally, in *The Anglo-Saxons of the Kentucky Mountains*, Semple made a considerable effort to centre women’s livelihoods, presenting an early geographical analysis on gendered experiences.³⁹ I therefore argue that although there are no records of Semple’s personal relationship with feminism, her actions aligned with the feminist aim of empowering women through education and research.

However, Semple exclusively supported wealthy, white women in accessing education which does not align with the inclusive nature of today’s intersectional feminism. While Semple had to overcome many gender-related barriers, she was very economically privileged. Semple belonged to a wealthy family and could afford to travel and study, an uncommon luxury for many in 19th century America including men.⁴⁰ She travelled to India, Indonesia, Japan, and across Europe.⁴¹ However, despite her abundant experience and impressive status as a geographer, she received unequal pay throughout her career.⁴² These layers of gender discrimination present within the geographic discipline meant that while Semple was able to overcome certain patriarchal obstacles, she was hindered by many others. Nevertheless, her ability to break down barriers was impressive - where feminist geographers in the 1970s were supported by

the passing of sex-discrimination legislation which compelled departments to employ more women, Semple was not.⁴³ I therefore argue that although her economic privilege enabled her in many ways, Semple exercised profound amounts of agency to challenge the male-domination of geography. Simultaneously, Semple suffered from patriarchal norms as illustrated below.

Perpetuating Patriarchal Imperialism

Challenging and perpetuating patriarchy are not mutually exclusive acts and Semple reproduced the patriarchal status quo in many ways. With Haraway's 'situated knowledges' in mind,⁴⁴ it should be noted that Semple's work was based on a cohort of male thinkers and their theories due to the male domination of knowledge production. This is exemplified in the androcentric opening lines of *Influences*: "Man is a product of the earth's surface... he is a child of the earth".⁴⁵ Like many historical female scholars, Semple was socialised into using language-based restrictions that centred relations between man and the environment.⁴⁶ Blunt and Rose add that during Semple's time women's writing had to emulate men's writing due to pressures relating to the reception of their knowledge.⁴⁷ Specifically, female scholars were judged more heavily as individuals and their writing therefore had to strictly imitate the imperialist 'masculine voice' to be taken seriously.⁴⁸ This gender-specific pressure is evidenced by the *Daily Express* in their fixation over Semple's appearance above her academic contributions, drawing attention to her "light-blue evening gown with a string of fine pearls".⁴⁹ This factor was never central to the reviews of male scholars demonstrating that Semple had to work particularly hard to gain respect as an academic and be perceived as more than an object. As Hermann claims, "a woman who wants to be educated is forced to let a little man grow inside her".⁵⁰ This is applicable to Semple as she faced various patriarchal constraints that influenced the

content and style of her writing. In achieving scholarly recognition, she perpetuated the patriarchy.

For many feminist theorists, patriarchy and imperialism are intertwined. Spencer-Wood argues that patriarchy was intrinsic to colonialism and empire, with the imposition of laws and policies in seized lands that reflected Western ideologies surrounding women's subordinate nature.⁵¹ Considering this entanglement, I argue that where Semple justified American expansion she also perpetuated patriarchy. The Western imperial context created opportunities for women of a certain race and class to write and legitimise the actions of the state, meaning such women perpetuated essentialist constructions of racial inferiority in their work.⁵² Semple exemplifies this, achieving liberation at the expense of countless others as her ethnocentric discourse symbolically and physically harmed subsequently 'subaltern' groups. In an era of New Imperialism where her gender rendered her inferior, Semple found power and authority through racial 'superiority'. As Hanson notes in relation to feminist geographical scholarship, "what some women view as positive change, others may see as harmful to their interests".⁵³ Rather than building broad alliances as intersectional feminists seek to do, Semple alienated many women by inflicting the 'double jeopardy' of racist and gendered marginalisation on them.⁵⁴ She contributed to 'horizontal hostilities', placing white women above the women she Othered.⁵⁵ It is impossible to say whether Semple was socialised into this thinking or made a calculated decision to inflict epistemological violence in pursuit of academic success. However, it can be said with certainty that Semple was not innocent, supporting Pearson's claim that universal female innocence is a myth.⁵⁶ Certain women condemned the concept of empire long before Semple's time, suggesting that the imperialist

patriarchy was not entirely imposing. Mary Wollstonecraft, a founding feminist philosopher, claimed in her 1792 publication *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that the rulers of empire were morally corrupt.⁵⁷ Jane Addams, an activist, sociologist and philosopher born just 3 years before Semple produced anti-imperial critiques throughout her lifetime.⁵⁸ This supports the argument that Semple should be heavily critiqued when read today and not simply excused as a product of her time, a time when patriarchy and imperialism powerfully reinforced each other.

It is also useful to compare Semple to contemporary geographer Linda McDowell to illustrate the extent to which Semple falls short as an intersectional feminist. Both Semple and McDowell have received major awards and titles for their efforts in transforming the geographic discipline.⁵⁹ McDowell's work is intersectional, centres inequality, challenges patriarchy and lifts up the oppressed. For example, McDowell considered how the labour market status of migrants in the UK reflects 'intersectionality at work'.⁶⁰ In a markedly different manner, Semple's work perpetuates harmful normative assumptions surrounding race and empire. I therefore argue that to align with today's standards of intersectional feminist geography, any feminist reconstruction of geography's past should note but not inflate Semple's positive contributions and must discuss her shortcomings. I align here with Domosh's view that a discipline's history cannot be selectively remembered.⁶¹ This critically inclusive approach deepens our understanding of empire and its connection to gender relations. Imperialism created opportunities for Semple, and yet widespread male socio-political dominance also limited her.

A Wider Trend of Problematic Women

The progress and expansion of feminist movements has been significant across the globe.

However, patriarchy remains a pervasive structure that is perpetuated by certain influential women. This paper has argued that while Semple can be admired for occupying male space and actively encouraging women to participate in knowledge production, her work inside this space should be heavily critiqued. In this section, this argument is taken beyond academia and into contemporary politics to demonstrate patriarchy's broad influence across society. Georgia Meloni is an example of a leading female figure who simultaneously challenges and perpetuates patriarchy. Meloni broke through a heavy glass ceiling in 2022 when she was elected as Italy's first female prime minister, defying the male-domination of a specific realm as Semple did. Yet, Meloni also mirrors Semple's androcentrism by leading the Brothers of Italy party and taking the political title of *il presidente del Consiglio*, where *il* is the masculine article used instead of *la*.⁶² Furthermore, through condemning abortion Meloni has increased the obstacles that women face every day.⁶³ Durose et al.'s concept of 'acceptable difference' is relevant here, describing political candidates who conform to aspects of the archetypal male politician to render their difference acceptable and reduce potential Othering.⁶⁴ As Meloni's rise to power demonstrates, "patriarchy readily accommodates some women into positions of power, provided that the women are male-identified, male-centred, and act according to patriarchal values".⁶⁵ This also applies to Semple as although she was deviant enough to break the barrier surrounding academia, she aligned with the aims of the imperialist patriarchy. It is important to note that patriarchy evolves, and that patriarchy is particular – it creates different obstacles within different institutions, whether academic or political. Yet ultimately, Meloni's case further supports the argument that the structure of patriarchy and female agency can co-exist, and agency can be well-directed, harmful, or both. Rather than being passive 'robots'

controlled by patriarchal forces of domination, women are autonomous beings capable of choosing violence.⁶⁶ Simultaneously, patriarchy is deeply entrenched and continues to support various forms of inequality therefore feminist geographers must continue to study the past and present to fully understand it. For this reason, Semple should be included within a feminist historiography of geography, aiding the interrogation of patriarchy.

To conclude, Semple challenged the patriarchal nature of geography by establishing the very presence of women within the discipline and inspiring others to follow. Therefore, although Semple did not contribute to feminist theoretical development within geography, she can be retrospectively regarded as an early feminist geographer. However, Semple's feminism is far from intersectional, and it has been argued here that her flawed theorising amounted to acts of epistemological violence which perpetuated patriarchy. Semple's story is one of both profound autonomy and patriarchal constraint. Ultimately, feminist historiographers have a responsibility to critically include Semple in order to understand the ways in which female geographers have challenged, been hindered by, and reproduced the status quo. As modern-day feminist geographers such as Domosh and Seager have been critiqued for their lack of engagement with race and ethnicity, it remains important that geographers are continuously pushed to be self-reflexive and produce intersectional analyses.⁶⁷ While patriarchy continues to permeate much of contemporary life to the detriment of all, scholars must question the biases that are currently being reflected in their work and consider how academia can improve as a whole. The decoding of historical knowledge offers a blueprint for revealing the power dynamics shaping today's writing. I therefore encourage further research into the development of a truly holistic, intersectional, and feminist historiography of geography.

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