

# ***NO PLACE FOR A FEMINIST: INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE PROBLEM SOUTH***

## ***SWS Presidential Address***

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*Perceptions of the American South as being no place for a feminist continue to affect and inform decisions about research and activism in the region. By taking a closer look at Memphis and the American South, and by questioning longstanding assumptions, stereotypes, and omissions about the region, we create additional opportunities for further discussion about the complexities of feminism, intersectionality, and place. I challenge two common assumptions about the South. The first is the assumption that southern feminists are rare, or nonexistent, and have had little influence on developing feminist perspectives or pursuing social activism as local initiatives. The second assumption involves the concept of the Problem South and the propensity of scholars, journalists, and activists to fall back on old ideas about southern exceptionalism, and to emphasize continuities between the Old South and New South while minimizing discontinuities. In challenging these assumptions, I review the significance of intersectionality and suggest that paying attention to region and place offers an additional level of complexity and explanatory power for understanding social phenomena, including gender, sexualities, and social movements, as well as southern feminism and the Problem South.*

**Keywords:** *intersectionality; American South; place; feminism; southern exceptionalism*

She was branded by her own people here as a courageous and brave woman. When the news was circulated, a mob had planned, as her punishment, to take her to Court Square and tie her to a tree, without clothing and whip her to death, but she was too wise to stay here and eluded the mob. . . . After all, she did well to have left Memphis. Memphis was no place for a woman of that caliber.<sup>1</sup>

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Ida B. Wells, anti-lynching crusader, suffragist, civil rights activist, teacher, newspaper woman, and social critic, never returned to Memphis. She left town after mob violence exploded against her and her newspaper following her reports on the “Lynching at the Curve” that took place at the People’s Grocery in 1892 (Duster 1970, 64). Having been fired from public school teaching for writing editorials criticizing racial segregation, having been condemned by outraged whites for publishing her research on lynchings exposing false allegations of rape used as a cover up for consensual sexual relationships between white women and black men and as a justification of murder, and, finally, having escaped an angry mob, Wells permanently resettled in Chicago.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, violence did not silence the woman who was born into slavery two years before the Emancipation Proclamation, who was orphaned by yellow fever, and who struggled to create a life for herself and her siblings. She relocated, married, reared children, and continued her activism and her work for social justice. Today, more than 85 years after her death, feminists celebrate the life of Ida B. Wells and her contributions. However, perceptions about Memphis, and indeed the American South, as no place for a feminist, or no place for a woman of her caliber, continue to affect and inform decisions about research and activism in the region.

Holding the Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) Winter Meeting in Memphis in 2016 introduced members of SWS from different parts of the United States and the world to local activists in a majority African American–populated city located in the American South. We arranged for members to visit and experience the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel, site of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and memorial to the global human rights struggle. Learning about the city’s complicated racial history, its “Mid-South” location at the intersection of so many geographic and political borders in the middle of the United States, and its local connections to the global struggle for human rights, offers much material for reflection. By taking a closer look at Memphis and the American South, and by questioning longstanding assumptions, stereotypes, and omissions about the region, we create additional opportunities for further discussion about the complexities of feminism, intersectionality, and place.

Perceptions of the South as a problem-ridden place, an American “other,” and a regional suspect have dominated social science research for decades. The southern exceptionalism perspective typically explains the

Problem South as a product of a regional history of slavery, civil war, segregation, and resistance to civil rights, as if somehow these events could be separated from national history. By treating the region as an exception to the idealized American democratic experience, scholars focus on so-called internal factors, often defining racial and gender inequality as regional residuals and as evidence of backwardness in an otherwise modern society. In so doing, they neglect external institutions, overstate the actual level of progressivism throughout the United States, and fail to understand racial and social inequality as part of something Gunnar Myrdal characterized as *an American dilemma* (Myrdal 1944). Researchers who subscribe to this narrow view of a regional American “other” and treat it as an object of problems-oriented research not only overlook generations of agency among scholars and activists in and from the region but also perpetuate regional stereotypes (Rushing 2009).

From my standpoint as a white southerner, a feminist, and a sociologist, I want to reconsider ideas about feminism and the Problem South. The words of southern writer and activist Lillian Smith, written more than 60 years ago, inform my work. “There are few spots on the globe as interesting as the South; and perhaps none so rich in startlingly poignant paradoxes. . . . The time has come . . . to see the region in perspective” (Gladney 1993, 38). Because I view feminism as an empowering framework for understanding and critiquing knowledge about the world and seeking new perspectives, I challenge two common assumptions about the South. The first is the assumption that southern feminists are rare, or nonexistent, and have had little influence on developing feminist perspectives or pursuing social activism as local initiatives. The second assumption is the concept of the Problem South and the propensity of scholars, journalists, and activists to fall back on old ideas about southern exceptionalism, and to emphasize continuities between the Old South and New South while minimizing discontinuities. Discussions of the Problem South tend to rely on cultural explanations of a pervasive “mind of the South,” or a plantation or hillbilly mentality. Continuing to evoke old explanations for the Problem South, and continuities between the past and present to explain twenty-first century phenomena fails to advance knowledge and misdirects efforts for change. In challenging these assumptions, I review the significance of intersectionality and suggest that paying attention to region and place offers an additional level of complexity and explanatory power for understanding social phenomena, including gender, sexualities, and social movements, as well as southern feminism and the Problem South.

## A PLACE FOR FEMINISTS: REMAPPING FEMINISM

Most scholars think of feminism in the United States as a northern reform movement, and many critics insist that feminism is an ideology promulgated by bi-coastal liberal elites who are out of touch with real people in real places. Some southerners dismiss feminism as a product of Yankee invaders or “outside agitators” adopted by southern sympathizers; or, paraphrasing Sociologist John Shelton Reed, they discredit feminism as yet another unwelcome project “conceived in the North and visited upon the South” (Reed 1975, xxi). But feminism takes many routes, and we have much to learn from each other (Segal 1999). Much has been written about feminism and woman’s suffrage in the United States, historically noting the failures of nineteenth-century suffragists, particularly those in the South. Some attribute the early twentieth-century resurgence of woman’s suffrage in the region not only as a response to a national movement but also as a New South progressive movement credited primarily to privileged southern white women educated outside the South. These studies ignore or diminish the experiences of less educated women of all races living and working in the region (Green 1998).

Historian Janet Allured acknowledges multiple influences shaping the twentieth-century women’s movement, but she argues that the South was underappreciated and misunderstood as a “nursery of women’s liberation in the United States,” and notes further that “Louisiana was a particularly critical incubator of the southern cradle of resistance” (Allured 2013, 390). Her research offers a counternarrative to conventional wisdom, as she explains that “feminism was instead part of a regional movement against social injustice that southerners initiated, mobilized, and energized” on their own behalf (Allured 2013, 389). Less educated working women, including whites and women of color, led the movement in a region where more women—both black and white—worked outside the home and where levels of educational attainment were lower than the national average.

Allured suggests that mid-twentieth-century southern feminists, particularly activists during the 1960s and 1970s, may have been less recognizable than their northern counterparts because they were less visible. In other words, grassroots activism among black, white, and Latina women was not uncommon in the South, but patterns of resistance may have been more difficult to detect by local elites and outside observers. Knowing that direct political confrontation provoked potentially ruinous personal outcomes, many southern feminists adopted stealth tactics for rallies and

marches, preferring to “glove their defiance in respectability and decorum” within the limits of acceptable southern norms for dress and deferential behavior (Allured 2013, 391). Resistance can be accomplished without directly challenging all local norms, despite the appearance of passivity and adherence to tradition.

One professor published an article in *The Radical Teacher* about her experiences teaching feminist literature in Alabama during the 1970s, noting that “twentieth-century feminism will develop differently in the South than it does in other parts of the country” (Jones 1977, 34). Describing herself using an apparent oxymoron—“Bible Belt” feminist—she also emphasized the importance of decorum and respectability, adding that a Southern feminist can do as “she pleases as long as it is done quietly. Silent personal revolutions are possible, but overt attacks on the sacred traditional codes are dangerous” (Jones 1977, 32). The Jones article includes a photograph that captures an unlikely team of Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) supporters. Well-coiffed white, middle-aged Alabama feminists wearing pearls to adorn plaid or polka-dot couture are pinning daffodils, the symbol of Alabama suffragettes, to the pin-striped suit lapel of a young black legislator wearing an Afro hairstyle and a mustache. Representative Tony Harrison, sponsor of the ERA in the state legislature, is the only person of color in the photograph. Beneath superficial decorum and beaming smiles, and despite the visible absence of women of color, the symbolic challenge to traditional codes involving race, gender, and region is hard to miss.

Congress passed the ERA in 1972 and sent it to all 50 states for ratification, but the constitutional amendment fell three states short of the 38 required by the 1982 deadline. All southern states, except for Tennessee, refused to ratify the ERA. The narrow defeat of the ERA nationally, and its overwhelming rejection by southern legislatures, added fuel to stereotypes about a staunchly conservative patriarchal region, further obscuring the roots of southern feminism and solidifying dismissive ideas about southern exceptionalism and anti-feminism. Interestingly, Phyllis Schlafly, the anti-feminist icon of that time, was an educated, conservative activist, but not a southerner. Nonetheless, discussion of Schlafly’s Midwestern origins and how her regional identity may have affected her politics received far less attention than the region where her anti-ERA campaign was most effective.

Many southerners have been willing to take risks, asserting bold public statements, engaging in civil disobedience, or pursuing legal remedies for discrimination. A few prominent names include Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks,

Fannie Lou Hamer, Norma L. McCorvey (*Roe v. Wade*), Mildred Loving (*Loving v. Virginia*), Lilly Ledbetter (*Ledbetter v. Goodyear*; Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009), Barbara Jordan (congresswoman), Crystal Lee Sutton (the North Carolina union organizer portrayed in the film *Norma Rae*), Ann Richards (governor), and Wendy Davis (legislator). Many others continue subtle but powerful acts of everyday resistance, easily missed. These low-profile actions confirm that “most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites” (Scott 1985, 36). Plenty of historical and literary evidence shows that “southern women have long suffered under the muzzle of good manners, leading to new strategies within the bounds of proper etiquette or purposeful tests of the tension between truth and propriety” (Perkins 2007, 23).

Recent events indicate that tensions between truth and propriety, and place-specific strategies for resistance, continue shaping the twenty-first-century South. A Women’s March on Washington took place January 21, 2017, bringing about 500,000 marchers to the nation’s capital and attracting three to five million participants in worldwide sister marches (Hartocollis and Alcindor 2017). Supporters gathered in cities on every continent, and in towns and cities—including those in the south—both large and small. The Women’s March publicized a policy platform emphasizing reproductive rights, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) rights, pay equity, immigration reform, and other feminist issues. Peaceful marchers wearing knitted pink cat-eared hats<sup>3</sup> and carrying thought-provoking signs attracted global media attention as well as hateful and demeaning commentary from detractors, including some elected officials. Misogynistic remarks tweeted by one North Carolina state legislator demeaning the Women’s March garnered national attention and provoked a backlash. North Carolina State Senator Joyce Krawiec tweeted: “Message to crazies@Women’s March—If brains were lard, you couldn’t grease a small skillet. You know who you are.” After tubs of lard began accumulating at her office and her home, sent by angry constituents who also started a GOFUNDME<sup>4</sup> account to send more, Krawiec deleted the tweet and apologized (Cioffi 2017). However, she qualified her apology by saying her comments were intended only for those women who acted inappropriately. Perhaps that’s what she meant by “you know who you are.” Another North Carolina official, the state’s newly elected Insurance Commissioner Mike Causey, a Republican who narrowly defeated the incumbent Democrat in 2016, shared a meme on Facebook

linked to his Twitter account saying: “In one day Trump got more fat women out walking than Michelle Obama did in 8 years” (Bell 2017). Inundated with a barrage of criticism, he apologized for “a momentary lapse in judgment” (Bell 2017). Misogynistic and racist tweets, insults, and disparaging remarks about the march have not been limited to North Carolina or to the South, but there is something southern about these particular insults involving fat shaming and references to pig products, particularly as they relate to historical patterns of ridiculing women for lacking “proper decorum” as a means of social control. The negative response to these comments, however, along with the lard shipments, suggest that a direct confrontational style, or a taking-off-the-gloves approach, may be replacing less direct forms of resistance observed in previous struggles.

### INTERSECTIONALITY AND PLACE

Each generation of feminism produces new questions, responses, debates, and critiques that inform academics, activism, and identity. Intersectionality, for example, originated as a critique of feminism by women of color who called attention to the unacknowledged intersections of race, class, and gender in feminist theory and practice. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) used the term intersectionality to address problems of exclusion found in both gender-based research focusing on white women, and race-based research focusing on black men. Combining the two approaches failed to account for lived experience at neglected points of intersection—those that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations as opposed to dominant or mixed locations including race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Intersectionality critiqued and reinvigorated feminism and studies of difference. Some current applications of intersectionality include sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and immigration status, as well as age and ability. But place, insofar as it receives attention, remains in the background. Indeed, few scholars engage with the social context of place—in terms of region, community, or locality—as a framework for understanding gender systems, social movements, or feminisms (Guenther 2010, 5). Some social scientists, particularly those focused on urban and community studies, recognize that place is not static. Yet within this community framework for understanding place, social activism, especially related to feminism, typically receives little attention in

nonmetropolitan areas (Pini, Brandth, and Little 2014). A framework that considers the importance of place or locality potentially may change understandings of social actors in particular places. It also may affect perceptions and studies of feminism, which in the minds of many scholars is “solely based on observations of a nationally organized feminist presence” (Reger 2012, 3).

Place is more than a fixed, material, geographic location and offers new ways of thinking about intersectionality. When place is viewed as dynamic and agentic, it can be understood as being at the center of struggles of power and meaning and not relegated to the background. A social and political accomplishment, place shapes and is shaped by social inequalities, identities, life chances, and prospects for social change (Brown-Saracino 2015; Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2001; Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen 2000; Rushing 2009; Sharkey 2013). How the character and distinction of place affects and is affected by social actors varies across sites. In the Northeast, distinctive political cultures associated with place emerged fairly recently in Vermont and New Hampshire, and are identified with popular culture (Kaufman and Kaliner 2011). Think *Ben & Jerry's* ice cream and progressive Senator Bernie Sanders (Vermont) and The Granite State (New Hampshire). In the South, Atlanta is a distinctive place experiencing decades of economic and population growth. But Memphis is also a distinctive place that struggles to attract new residents and businesses. The city's history of a problem past (Rushing 2009) and unhealthy present characterized by high rates of obesity and unhealthy lifestyles create place distinctions that negatively affect growth. For some time now local political strategists have pursued creating a modern infrastructure for bicycling as an economic development strategy and a means of redefining place. By creating a supportive local bicycling culture, and making noteworthy investments in bicycling infrastructure, they have had remarkable success in changing perceptions of place, and changing characteristics of place. But our research, much to the dismay of local officials, found that these cultural and structural changes perpetuated structural inequalities and reproduced the power structure (Smiley, Rushing, and Scott 2016). Local officials attempted to refute our conclusions about race, class, and place, but their own data showed glaring gender discrepancies related to the local benefits of bicycling. Place matters, and efforts to change place character and tradition, may have unexpected consequences by perpetuating the status quo. As these examples show, thinking about how social actors, particularly those in marginalized social locations, are affected by social context, and how experiences differ according to region, locality, or community, adds another layer of complexity to intersectionality

for scholars and activists. Theories of place, thought to be the domain of cultural geographers and urban sociologists, contribute to understanding intersectionality, and may fill lacunae in literature related to gender, sexualities, identities, and social movements.

### **INTERSECTIONALITY: REPLACING GENDER AND SEXUALITIES**

Brown-Saracino's field work on Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer (LBQ) communities and identity cultures offers one example of the significance of place. Her research in four separate locales in the United States identified place-specific differences in orientations to sexual identity. Existing literature on sexualities typically cites national or temporal trends and does not explain these differences. Brown-Saracino also found that LBQ identity cultures do not respond to narrow place elements, such as hate crimes or party-affiliation figures. Instead, local cultures differ across sites because they respond to "loose bundles" of place elements. They include population numbers and acceptance, place narratives, and encounters with local demographic and cultural traits, especially those of their city's LBQ residents. Significantly, these "bundles" of place elements are dynamic, not static. They work in tandem, vary by city, and change over time (Brown-Saracino 2015, 4).

Katja Guenther's international work on post socialist feminists in East Germany engages place, gender, and feminism. Using a framework centered on place to explain how women's movements developed differently in two cities, she focuses on three dimensions of place—culture, politics, and location (Guenther 2010, 8). Paying attention to place makes women's activism at the local level more visible and explains differences across sites. Place also affects attachments between individuals and communities for the settings where they live, and efforts to create change. Guenther argues that place contributes to our understandings of social movements, explaining that most social movement literature overlooks activism at the nonnational level, rendering it less visible or unimportant. Guenther's findings concerning women's lives in East Germany resonate with Allured's (2013) historical findings in Louisiana, and Brown-Saracino's (2015) contemporary findings in four U.S. cities.

Knowledge about gender can be enhanced by thinking about place, and by thinking about the local, particularly as a matter of transnational feminist praxis (Massey 1994; Johnson 2008; Guenther 2010). But constructions of

femininity and masculinity, and the relationship between them, also vary according to place within nations. Although sociological literature widely recognizes gender as context-specific, sociologists have yet to engage fully with how or why specific gender systems surface in particular places, or how these gender systems may be used to define place.

Efforts to redefine place character and tradition as a means of changing the status quo may have paradoxical and unintended consequences, such as the support for a bicycling infrastructure in Memphis that reproduced the status quo. But place can be redefined with the intention of maintaining the status quo. This occurred in several state campaigns opposing same-sex marriage that occurred prior to the landmark 2015 Supreme Court ruling (*Obergefell v. Hodges*) in favor of same-sex marriage. Rasmussen's analysis of state campaigns against the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)—enacted into law in 1996—noted the centrality of place in those conflicts. In Nebraska, opponents of same-sex marriage chose not to debate DOMA as a policy issue. Instead, they constructed the political battle as a local struggle over the very meaning, identity, and autonomy of a place called Nebraska being threatened by decisions made elsewhere (Rasmussen 2006, 808). One campaign narrative portrayed DOMA supporters as a powerful minority of outsiders and elitists (e.g., gays, lesbians, and judges) who undemocratically challenged local, traditional values held by regular citizens. The anti-DOMA campaign defined Nebraska and traditional Nebraskan identity using family, faith, and football as symbols of a heteronormative and homogenous place characterized by hegemonic masculinity. The campaign contrasted authentic Nebraskans with outsiders, depicted as metropolitan gays, and urged voters to resist the outsider threat to hard-working populist families by embracing hegemonic masculinity and traditional gender roles.

Anti-DOMA forces displayed similar campaign strategies in Oregon where place distinctions between rural and urban framed the conflict. Anti-DOMA forces valorized rural Oregonians portrayed as struggling against their urban counterparts in Portland. In Vermont, a place that typically seems to welcome newcomers, "Take Back Vermont," the campaign organized against civil unions,<sup>5</sup> also expressed nativist resentment. Supporters of marriage equality were described and discredited as "elitist outsiders seeking special rights . . . who have mobbed in with far-fetched ideas from places like New Jersey—a flood of Bambi-lovers, tree huggers, birdwatchers, cybercommuters, wealthy retirees and year 'round summer people" (Rasmussen 2006, 811).

Place identity and attachment, linked with gender and sexuality, can be constructed and deployed as a means of resisting social change and maintaining the status quo. By conflating place with traditional family values (e.g., “faith and football”) and redefining political differences as evidence of outsider meddling to subvert local autonomy, defenders of the status quo are permitted to avoid discussions of discrimination and exclusion while practicing it. Coastal regions of the United States presumed to be more liberal and progressive, such as Oregon and Vermont, as well as regions in the midwest considered less liberal but more representative of America’s heartland, such as Nebraska, may become involved in campaigns invoking “place” to restrict civil liberties through exclusion. These campaigns used gender and sexuality to define place, as well as those privileged by place—insiders or people like “us.” Those who do not “legitimately” share the privilege of place, or who threaten it, are defined as outsiders. The exclusion of other people, possibilities, and life experiences returns us to the topic of intersectionality. Scholars and activists have much to gain by broadening the concept of intersectionality to include place, social context, region, and locale. As Rasmussen states:

The construction of “Nebraska,” as a set of identities, values and beliefs rooted in a place, is political in its exclusion of other possibilities, an exclusion of more than just sexual difference. Attention to the chain of meanings attached to “Nebraska” may enable the formation of political coalitions that respond to their constitutive exclusion from proper belonging in that place. (2006, 821)

### **SYMBOLIZING PLACE: RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN THE SOUTH**

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) ended a 15-year economic boycott of South Carolina in 2015 when the state legislature voted to remove the confederate flag from the State House to a museum on the capitol grounds. The decision to remove the flag came in response to outrage following the massacre of nine churchgoers attending Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston. Described as “one of the most conspicuous and polarizing symbols of the Old South,” the confederate battle flag was raised defiantly in 1962 when white southerners

were resisting racial integration (Fausset and Blinder 2015). Calls for removing the flag remained politically controversial until the church shooting and arrest of a young white man who posted the flag and a racist manifesto online before the shooting. Subsequently, white conservatives, including state Senator Paul Thurmond, son of segregationist U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, demanded and obtained action to remove the flag (Rios 2015).

Today, only Mississippi displays the confederate flag as a state symbol. But while the confederate flag is less likely to be used to symbolize one place—South Carolina, the first state to secede the Union and join the confederacy—now it is more likely than before to be publicly displayed as a symbol of white racial identity at political rallies and parades throughout the United States. Trump supporters waved the confederate flag at campaign rallies and post-election rallies in places such as Durango, Colorado; St. Petersburg, Florida; Hampton, Virginia; Fort Worth, Texas; Traverse City, Michigan; Silverton, Oregon; and Mount Vernon, Ohio (Fausset 2016). Prominent displays of this powerful symbol remind us that white racial identity, white supremacy, and institutional racism never have been limited by regional boundaries.

Southern states alternately hoist and lower confederate flags, but the region continues to be identified with lifting idealized white women to a pedestal. Defending and protecting white womanhood has been used to justify slavery, segregation, and, in fact, resistance to establishing public education (Rushing 2002). Twenty-first-century ideals of beauty may have shifted, even in the South, but W. J. Cash noted in *The Mind of the South* (1941) that the white southern lady became identified “with the very notion of the South itself” (Wilson 2009, 31). Then and now, the white southern woman symbolizes place; but idealized representations of white women vary by class, as shown by the prominence of idealized white women in Carnival Memphis rituals and the characteristics of a redneck woman portrayed in a Nashville country song.

Carnival Memphis began as Cotton Carnival during the Great Depression. As it approaches its centennial and after years of public criticism related to civil rights activism, the Carnival has changed its name, desegregated, and reinvented itself as a private event supporting various local charitable causes. Many Carnival rituals have changed, but the ritualized displays of young white single women as queens, accompanied by older white married men as kings, remains the same. Each year a secret process selects as queen a young, single, college-aged woman from a

prominent family. Much like the idealized “southern lady,” she embodies privilege and normative femininity. She does not question dominant social expectations about the role of women, dons fashionable attire for public appearances, and conforms to normative gender expectations. Many queens claim the honor of being daughters and granddaughters of former Carnival royalty. The queen is the embodiment of traditional authority and social power. The source of that power comes from economic and social power shared within families and derived from social connections and affiliations with prestigious organizations. Place provides meaning and stability for these rituals. Place also confirms and sustains privileged families. Participation in these rituals helps socialize the next generation for maintaining distinctions of wealth, power, and status. These rituals also reproduce local culture and place distinctiveness, and promote attachment to place (Rushing 2009, 158–68).

Popular culture, especially music, has the capacity to affect gender identity. Country music is the most prominent and widely circulating platform for white working-class, southern, heterosexual identity (Hubbs 2011, 52). Gretchen Wilson’s song, “Redneck Woman,” earned a Grammy in 2005 and attracted popular and scholarly attention. Although the redneck woman persona in the song is not necessarily southern, she could be. Unlike the idealized southern woman, however, she is working class, aware of her “trashy” social location, and defiant of middle-class culture. In so doing, she redefines white, working-class, female, and, I would add, southern identity. According to Hubbs, the redneck woman “stakes serious claims for her resourcefulness, country affiliations and tastes, desirability, and, especially, agency” (Hubbs 2011, 47). Unlike the southern lady, the redneck woman is not submissive to social obligations of family, community, and traditional power. She rejects designer labels, prefers beer to champagne, drives a pickup truck, and articulates “a cross-gender, macho-affirmative rejection of the very standards of hegemonic middle-class femininity” (Hubbs 2011, 62).

Navigating gender, class, and racial boundaries in popular music is not new, particularly not in Memphis. Elvis Presley, the white working-class musical icon of the 1950s, adopted a black working-class style of dress and performance. Some would argue that he appropriated black culture and did so for the same reason black men utilized it—to demonstrate his dignity and self-respect which were under assault in segregated middle-class culture (Hubbs 2011, 65). Similarly, Wilson’s “Redneck Woman” appropriates cultural resources from across the gender line to forge a

positive working-class female identity, and challenge the idealized southern white woman as a symbol of place.

## CONCLUSION

Perceptions of the American South as being no place for a feminist continue to affect and inform decisions about research and activism in the region. During preparations for the 2016 winter SWS meeting I was pleased to hear that some of the activists for reproductive rights in the Northeastern United States were looking for opportunities to meet and become involved with activists in southern states as well as those in other countries. I was encouraged also by member support for visiting the National Civil Rights Museum. Like most social scientists, many of us think of place in the background of research and activism but seldom think of it as central to our research. It becomes a point of activism primarily when SWS decides to boycott certain sites for meetings; such was the case when we elected not to go to Little Rock, Arkansas, when the legislature passed HB1228 permitting denial of public services to LGBTQ people and other minorities. And if North Carolina refuses to repeal House Bill 2, the so-called “bathroom bill” which clearly discriminates against transgender people, SWS as well as other sociological organizations will decide to join college sports events, entertainers, and others who have chosen to boycott the state. Sustained boycotts may be necessary, as was the case with the NAACP and South Carolina regarding the confederate flag issue, but SWS can continue to make the organization’s position known as we have in the past and fight for justice.

Place matters not only for protesting discrimination and injustice, but also for informing feminist research and activism. Intersectionality offers a conceptual framework for thinking about place as part of the analysis of exclusion and marginalization, and for making invisible social actors more visible, particularly at the local or regional level. Place offers an additional level of complexity for understanding social phenomena, including sexualities and social movements, as well as the Problem South. Theories of place, thought to be the domain of cultural geographers and urban sociologists, contribute to understanding intersectionality and may fill lacunae in literature related to gender, sexualities, identities, and social movements. Place also contributes to new possibilities for feminist research and activism.

## NOTES

1. Fred Hutchins cited in Decosta-Willis, *Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells* (Beacon Press, 1995), 2.
2. Sociologist Troy Duster, former American Sociological Association president, is the grandson of Ida B. Wells.
3. The knitted pink hats were part of the Pussyhat Project created for the 2017 Women's March on Washington. Pussyhat is a play on the word pussycat, or pussy—a derogatory term for female genitalia. The hats made a visual statement and the loaded word was chosen for the project to reclaim it as a means of empowerment. <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/>
4. GOFUNDME is a personal, Internet-based, crowdfunding platform for raising money.
5. A civil union is a legal relationship between same-sex couples that gives them some of the rights and protections of marriage but is not recognized in all states.

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