The progressive common visions of an earlier period of national liberation movements have been overtaken by conservative retreats into civilizations that, as cultural abstractions, now serve as excuses for denying rights to their constituencies.

While we need to criticize the policies and activities of powers such as the United States for generating, or being oblivious to, the disastrous consequences of globalization, such criticism needs to be accompanied more than ever before by critique of the leaderships in these other societies that are no less disastrous. The Taliban started its terror at home, and against women. Pointing to the part United States anti-Communism played in the emergence of the Taliban is historically instructive, but it does not do away with the responsibility of the Taliban leaders for their criminal activities. I may add here that this necessity of a double-critique – both of the powers that dominate and shape the world, and of reactionary culturalist responses to it that legitimize oppressive politics – is better grasped by those in the 'Third World' engaged in social and ideological struggles than by intellectuals in Europe and the United States who, rebelling against a legacy of Eurocentrism, are often too anxious to pledge allegiance to the cultural claims of fictive civilizations.

Places offer a way of challenging this situation of cultural reification across all civilizational 'boundaries'. As Arturo Escobar has put it cogently, 'culture sits in places'. Culture, understood not in the abstract, or in terms of the ideologies of power, is inextricable from the practices through which people define and conduct their everyday lives, in the process generating ever new cultural practices as their circumstances change. It is, in other words, as alive as the lives that it defines and expresses. There are trans-place cultures, needless to say, that are generated by the interactions of places, and of places with other social and political entities (including other 'civilizations'), but culture, to be meaningful as an aspect of life, needs to be located in everyday life in its historicity, and in all its variability across places. It is this culture that proves intolerable to the forces of homogenizing power. We are complicit in such intolerance to the extent that our language legitimizes abstract cultural claims that presuppose boundaries of nations, regions or civilizations. Place-based politics, approached through the experience of women, is ultimately about generating a new language of cultures and development so that we may begin to think and act in the world in new ways.

Women and the Politics of Place: Ruminations and responses

JULIE GRAHAM

ABSTRACT Julie Graham connects the categories used by the introductory paper to the project – 'place', 'women' and 'politics' – to the economic politics that she and Katherine Gibson are engaged in with several communities in the US, Australia and the Asia Pacific region. This political work builds upon the specificity of places with existing economic identities, resources and capacities; it draws on the willingness and ability of women to become subjects of non-capitalist development; and it pursues a politics of language in constructing diverse community economies in the face of globalization.

KEYWORDS alternative futures; capitalist economy; globalization; meshwork; transformation

I keep saying that what characterizes the concept of crisis is that it should always lead to a statement of both problems and possibilities (otherwise it would be just 'problems as usual'). And that we might not be able to characterize the crisis with the same categories (liberal state, economic growth, participation . . .) that have created
and sustained precisely the model that is allegedly in crisis. If necessary, we need to induce a crisis in our categories of thought so we might be able to visualize other configurations as we work through ‘the crisis’. I wonder if this is not what we are trying to do with ‘place’ even if of course with little success. (Arturo Escobar, e-mail communication, 12 September 2001)

**Questions**

Reading the article entitled ‘Women and the Politics of Place: A Comment’, I am inspired by its adventurous spirit and lack of theoretical closure to continue thinking about the three questions it circles around: Why place? Why women? And what kind of politics might this be? How might a new politics begin to reveal and create new worlds, offering novel self-positionings in the face of globalization? These questions beg the further question that Arturo Escobar raises in the quote shown earlier: how do we create the productive crisis in our categories – place, women, and politics – that could liberate us to envision and enact alternative futures?

Like the article itself, I do not have definitive answers, but I do have some reflections that emerge from the work Kathie Gibson and I have been doing with communities who are engaged in local projects of economic discovery and construction. It has become all too apparent that for these projects to gain (self)-respect, they must resist being inscribed within the dominant discourse of globalization, for that discourse renders them no more than small, isolated, and ultimately inconsequential. Necessarily, then, we have found ourselves engaged in the deconstructive work of extricating the local from its binary relationship with the global, since locality will always be subordinate and devalued within the binary frame. What strikes me as I read the article is that this deconstructive project is part of a ‘politics of place’. But it’s not a simple part, requiring as it does a reworking of meanings that are deep-seated in our bodies and psyches.

**Reworking the meanings**

As deconstructionists remind us, the project of deconstruction is Sisyphean in form. No matter how often we attempt to set localities on a path of freedom, they will tend to be re-inscribed within the global/local binary, and deprived of power and agency in that move. Creative re-visionings are not enough to circumvent this drama of recursion. Globalization discourse has produced all of us as local subjects who are subordinated to, and contained within, a ‘global capitalist economy’. Ultimately, then, the problem of locality is a problem of the subject, and the ethical challenge to a politics of place is one of re-subjectivation – how to produce ourselves and others as local agents who are economically creative and viable, who are subjects rather than objects of development (however we may want to define that term). This economic emphasis is of course only one direction for a politics of place, but in our view it is a salient one, given the dominant and disabling role of ‘the economy’ in mainstream images of globalization.

Wishing to redress the marginalization of localities that accompanies all the talk about a ‘global economic order’, we have begun to work within a new form of economic politics. This community-based politics incorporates three principal elements:

- a language of the ‘diverse economy’ through which we can come to see local economies as places with existing, highly specific economic identities and capacities rather than simply as nodes in a global capitalist system;
- practices of the self through which we as local subjects can become agents rather than victims of economy. Here we draw on Foucault’s vision of intentional self-transformation as the ethical moment in a political process; and
- projects of non-capitalist development that build or enhance community economic organizations and institutions.

**Engaging with new forms of politics**

Our political engagement in several localities has introduced us to a range of economic subjects – individuals who are differently open to economic possibility, to constructing new communities, and to thinking and acting in novel ways. We thought at first that retrenched workers in older industrial