Identity and Difference: Complicating Gender in Archaeology

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Abstract
From its inception, the archaeology of gender was entwined with feminism. Engagement has engendered reconstructions of complex, diverse peoples and practices that are more equitable, relevant, and sound. Yet, for many archaeologists, the connection with feminist perspectives has frayed in recent years. Their studies of gender articulate dated ideas about women and epistemological frames that highlight duality and universality. Examinations of labor divisions typify shortcomings. To advance gender’s study and archaeology, practitioners need to consider several concerns about identity and difference emerging from third-wave feminism. Gender is envisioned as intersection. Bioarchaeology, especially, will benefit from feminist approaches that reflect critically and regard gender in nonnormative and multiscalar terms. To this end, resistance to feminism must fade. Opposition stems from its imagined relationship with postmodernism, but conflation misconstrues feminism’s sociopolitical commitment to emancipatory change. For their part, archaeologists can utilize feminist perspectives to diversify the field, explore difference, and tackle archaeological issues with sociopolitical resonance.
BEGINNINGS

Her reputation of reading a great deal hung about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic; it was supposed to engender difficult questions...

–Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady

To conceive this review, I first revisited a scholarly touchstone: Conkey & Spector’s “Archaeology and the Study of Gender” (1984). Unsurprisingly, I found its key points still cogent after 25 years. To expose presentism, androcentrism, and ethnocentrism, Conkey & Spector advocated for critical theory building. The authors endeavored to detect material traces of gender roles and relations, identities and ideology. They did not suggest that inquiry be limited to women. Rather, the past that Conkey & Spector envisioned was diversely peopled, dynamic, and complex. Such efforts, they concluded, would ultimately transform archaeology’s practice and scholarship. But, a study of gender could not be extricated from feminist perspectives. Thus, this catalytic piece represents fruition of its authors’ deep-rooted personal and professional engagements with feminism (Wylie 2002, p. 189).

Tracking her intellectual history, Conkey (2007b) identifies formative familial inspirations, undergraduate activism, and professional actualization as playing important parts in the publication’s conception. Spector shared similar experiences (2007). In fact, the feminist movement, which battles against institutionalized sexism on professional and personal fronts, resonated globally for many early archaeologists of gender. One European happening was the Norwegian Archaeological Association’s 1979 workshop, “Were They All Men?” Publication of proceedings followed in time (Bertelsen et al. 1987), and the event triggered subsequent conferences, conscious raising, and collaborations (Engelstad 2007).

In North America, archaeologists heeded Conkey & Spector’s call for critical evaluation and expansion of research interests. Conferences and sessions at professional meetings in turn generated edited volumes (e.g., Claassen 1992, Gero & Conkey 1991) that have bloomed into a sizeable corpus. Yet, when Conkey & Gero reviewed this literature in 1997, they discovered that many archaeologists disregarded feminist perspectives, making for woefully undertheorized and oversimplified studies of gender. So, what do archaeologists’ study of gender and their grasp of feminism look like in the twenty-first century?

Assessment of work conducted from 2000 to the present reveals that archaeologists’ study of gender has innovated and transformed the discipline. At best, this review is representative because it cannot be comprehensive. At worst, I generalize to underscore conceptual trends. Other reviews—Meskell (2002) on social identity, Joyce (2005) on the body, Voss (2008b) on sexuality—also demonstrate how feminist approaches to gender’s archaeological study have branched skyward. These authors do not see gender as the central root but as intertwined with age, sexuality, ethnicity, class, etc. As such, we might unearth identity and lived experience within shifting social and spatial settings. Bifurcation demonstrates the productivity of applying feminist theory to diverse concerns.

Yet, many archaeologists who undertake gender work reflect cursorily on feminists’ contributions, if they do so at all. By investigating gender independent of feminism, these practitioners have not truly addressed early calls or later assessments (Hays-Gilpin 2000, Nelson 2006, Wylie & Conkey 2007). Assorted academic feminists have long theorized about gender, and archaeologists’ neglect of this corpus is puzzling. Such a lacuna is akin to examining class relations with nary a reference to Marx or evolution with minimal mention of Darwin. Perhaps, Simone de Beauvoir does not come as trippingly from the lips. Inattention to feminist scholarship that has ebbed and flowed over several waves—an imperfect metaphor but useful heuristic device—makes for a deficient study of the lives of past peoples, as well as an archaeological practice that increasingly has less relevance in our modern world.
SINS OF OUR MOTHERS

Shortcomings with second-wave feminism are numerous, though two are especially glaring. Gynocentric foci and questions are as reductive and imbalanced as androcentric ones (Harding 1987), and evaluation of binary oppositions before application avoids projection of a “Western folk model” onto cultures distanced from our own in space and/or time (Collier & Yanagisako 1987). Indeed, Ortner’s (1974) influential query, “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” which posited universal, structuralist dualities, was later critiqued by feminist anthropologists (Moore 1988) and revised by Ortner (1996) herself. Sins of early second-wave feminist foremothers, however, are realized today when archaeologists study gender as Woman, a monolithic and essentialized category, and fail to interrogate reliance on dichotomy as a universal epistemological frame. Persistent disinclination to address difference in the past illustrates how archaeologists may revel in dirt but loath mess. Comparison of the 1989 and 2004 Chacmool Conferences presents an intriguing case.

An early endeavor, the 1989 Chacmool Conference “The Archaeology of Gender,” is significant for its tackling of androcentrism. Published proceedings assembled writings about gender bias in scientific endeavors, topics long misrepresented or neglected, and equity issues (Walde & Willows 1991). In hindsight, participants’ “discovery” of women qualifies their contributions as gynocentric and dualistic. But, engendering archaeologists’ study of gender was a conference goal, and so these ideas are not particularly troublesome if situated historically. Of greater cause for concern was that feminist thought did not inform many contributors’ queries (Hanen & Kelley 1992, Wylie 1992). Because feminism has long destabilized deep-rooted sexism, its repudiation—whether unconscious or intentional—appears counter-intuitive. Not situating disciplinary gender bias within a larger context of feminist practice, politics, and perspectives rendered past people as undifferentiated “faceless blobs” (Tringham 1991).

Given its title, “Que(c)rying Archaeology,” the 2004 conference promised to expand beyond gynocentric matters and dichotomous frames. Following from 15 years of intellectual and sociopolitical growth, archaeologists’ engagement with third-wave feminism and queer scholarship seemed a foregone conclusion. But, if review of the program is any indication (proceedings have yet to be published), many archaeologists’ studies of gender demonstrate stymied conceptual development and minimal critical assessment. “Gender,” as Conkey intuited, “is still often just another variable that has been added to an unreflective, positivist approach” (2003, p. 876). And, like the 1989 conference, “feminist” or “feminism” appears in only 4% of contributors’ abstracts (6 of 141 total abstracts). Dated feminist ideas—reductive duality, conflation of gender and sex, stereotypical representations—were especially at issue in considerations of labor organization. Twenty-two presentations (15.6% of all presentations) indicated that the timeworn topic remains focal in the archaeology of gender. Predominantly, participants explored ancient “sexual” divisions of labor, which led to reconstructions of normal social roles and relations (i.e., gender).

Certainly, not all participants committed such transgressions (or, more appropriately, failed to transgress). One presentation published elsewhere was Cobb’s (2005) thought-provoking que(c)rying of hunting-gatherer studies. She demonstrates how subtle heteronormativity has informed researchers’ mainstream investigations of Mesolithic Europe. Presentist reconstructions and heterosexist interpretations, Cobb reproaches, produce an inadequate study of the past and naturalize modern social interactions and activities (see also Dowson 2006). Additionally, Stockett (2005) questions if gender hierarchy and complementarity are the only models for understanding ideology, relations, and practices in pre-Columbia Mesoamerica, since “both are rooted in Western understandings of the sexual division of labor” (pp. 566–567; see also Gero & Scattolin 2002). Attention to social differences, gender fluidity, and performative contexts is
also necessary for illumining the complexity of past peoples’ practices of identity in daily life and extraordinary events. Mulling over lows and highs, the conference gives me pause for thought about developments (or setbacks) in the broader archaeological literature.

Despite several decades of feminist appraisal, initiated in response to man-the-hunter models (e.g., Dahlberg 1981, Slocum 1975), characterization of sexual divisions of labor as natural persists in mainstream scholarship (e.g., Elston & Zeanah 2002, Hildebrandt & McGuire 2002, Surovell 2000). Many studies are devoid of feminism, or when investigators acknowledge critiques of androcentrism, they remain unaware of theorizing beyond the early second wave that troubles duality, universality, and reductivism. Waguespack (2005) proclaims, “Whether construed as the de facto result of different physical capabilities or the product of reproductive goals, the division of labor exists as an empirical fact in all hunter-gatherer societies” (p. 668). That her Clovis case study is an archaeological one roots this fact deep in time. As physiological differences provide the basis for labor divisions, she implies that sex is gender. Her brief mention of the Agta from the Philippines, a culture in which women hunted, presents the group as a statistical anomaly rather than a potential complication to universal division. Yet, she offers no additional explanation when sex differences are insignificant or females exhibit “male-like” characteristics (e.g., Marchi et al. 2006, Sládek et al. 2007). Rather, the tendency is to represent men and women as homogenous and distinct.

The deeper in time their studies take them, the more stridently do some investigators avow that contemporary practices have ancient precursors. Paleolithic archaeologists Kuhn & Stiner (2006) argued that a sexual division of economic labor in the early Upper Paleolithic signals our species’ humanity. The narrow range of subsistence activities that monolithic Neanderthals enacted presaged their demise. In Neolithic studies, skeletal analysts utilize biological data to reify these preconceived notions. Of social organization at Abu Hureyra, Molleson (2007) contends that that people likely lived at the origins of “the sort of family structure with which we are familiar today” (p. 190). From this presumption the conceptual leap to a “natural” and rigid sexual division of labor is a short one, especially because “a division of roles between the sexes is ubiquitous in the animal kingdom” (p. 192). Labor divisions wedded to domesticity then facilitated craft specialization’s emergence. One female’s teeth may have borne the marks of basket weaving. Yet, Molleson does not explain how females would have had time to specialize, given the extensive and exhaustive domestic responsibilities they performed to sustain nuclear families. Potential complications to this picture—insignificant morphological differences between the sexes she identifies at Catalhöyük—go unpondered (compare Peterson 2002).

Conversely, many archaeologists inspired by recent feminist theorizing move beyond
grand, exclusionary narratives when studying labor (e.g., Owen 2005, Pyburn 2004, Robin & Brumfiel 2008). Too often androcentrism or inadvertent omission in ethnographic and colonial period sources, they caution, obscures certain activities, relations, or persons. Brumbach & Jarvenpa (2006) have urged scholars to evaluate these materials critically to discern “complex and variegated subsistence tasks actually performed by women and men regardless of, and sometimes in contradiction to, the normative constructions of gender fostered by their own cultures” (p. 306, emphasis in original). Additionally, to treat labor activities in homogeneous terms or as the domain of a specific gender oversimplifies actual practices. Envisioning the heterogeneity of labor entails thinking about age, ability, class, ethnicity, or religion, and these variables may cross-cut gender or structure individuals’ identities and activities to a greater extent (e.g., Brumfiel 2006, Rotman 2006, Wright 2008).

For example, Robin’s (2006) analysis of Chan Nohol, Belize, a Late Classic community, dispels the myth of “Man-the-Farmer” prevalent in Maya studies. From artifacts, ecofacts, soil chemistry, and architecture, she opens a window into daily activities, local landscapes, and broader socioeconomic interactions. Contrary to historic and ethnographic sources, farming was not strictly men’s work. Rather than strict compartmentalization according to gender or public/private spaces, farming involved collaborative family work. Robin takes a multiscalar approach, revealing how individuals exercised agency to maneuver within and against structures. Similarly, Jarvenpa & Brumbach (2006) have slain “Man-the-Hunter.” Their cross-cultural ethnoarchaeological studies unearthed varied people and processes involved in hunting—stalking, killing, processing, storing, distributing. In doing so, they uncovered community members’ interdependence and individual strategizing in the face of specific circumstances. Were Waguespack to mine their study of the Chipewyan, Khanty, Inupiaq, and Sámi for information, she would have to rethink her “facts” about hunter-gatherers’ sexual divisions of labor. The Agta would no longer seem quite so deviant.

“We must eradicate the sexual division of labor on which our society is based,” declared radical feminist Bonnie Kreps in 1972 (p. 75). That social organization is constructed not inevitable, however, is immaterial to (bio)archaeologists who conceive of ancient sexual divisions of labor as universal, timeless, and rigid. Applying presentist and ethnocentric lenses preserves too much and proves too little. To presume is not without disturbing ramifications, namely naturalization of the modern status quo. Such studies, then, justify professional inequities, stereotypical and narrow depictions of women’s and men’s work, and legislation legitimizing heteronormativity. Disinclination to conceive of difference as continuum not duality borders on a willful history of forgetting or chauvinistic dismissal of feminist literature from the mid-1980s onward.

THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Bailey (1997) remarks, “Assigning to a particular social movement the name ‘wave’...can be done only in retrospect, because, like a swimmer in the water, we are in the social medium” (p. 18, emphasis in original). Clarification of third-wave feminism is therefore challenging, unless 10+ years after Bailey’s statement we have drifted onward. Unlike second-wave feminism, the third wave emerged in a political climate indifferent to revolutionary and massive social movement and change (Kinser 2004, p. 131). Today, we see the Equal Rights Amendment not ratified and 2008 legislation outlawing same-sex marriages (e.g., California’s Proposition 8, Florida’s Amendment 2). Although queer activism extends feminist agendas, both seem to be making little sociopolitical headway. Unlike second-wave feminism, the third wave emerged in a political climate indifferent to revolutionary and massive social movement and change (Kinser 2004, p. 131). Today, we see the Equal Rights Amendment not ratified and 2008 legislation outlawing same-sex marriages (e.g., California’s Proposition 8, Florida’s Amendment 2). Although queer activism extends feminist agendas, both seem to be making little sociopolitical headway. Hence, many second-wave concerns remain relevant (i.e., reproductive strategies) or unresolved. We are far from postfeminist.

Within the academy, the third wave did generate significant shifts in thinking about
women, gender, and sexuality. Scholarly inquiry is then one type of praxis, as academics work to change minds, which may eventually lead to amending social policies. Third-wave feminists have reacted to second-wave identity politics that often essentialized women’s experiences (Bailey 1997). Significant precursors notwithstanding (e.g., Sojourner Truth, Emma Goldman), one can see formal inclusion of and internal critiques by critical race theorists (Davis 1981, Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981), gay and lesbian scholars (Rich 1980, Rubin 1984), and postcolonial academics (Mohanty 1984, Spivak 1985). Gender remains a core structuring principle but it is not always the central principle to constitute an individual’s identity in a given social or historical context. Consideration of age, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, etc.—not added but relational to gender—captures the complexity, contradiction, and plurality of lived experiences. Scholars also attend to the exclusionary social processes of how groups become different, the process of differentiation (Scott 1996). To do so avoids second-wave tendencies to naturalize differences and the postmodern pitfall of seeing differences everywhere but losing sight of shared experiences (Raddeker 2007, p. 139).

Despite some recent statements (Hamilton et al. 2007b, Whitehouse 2007), archaeology fortified by contemporary feminism does not eschew women. Rather, archaeologists have taken third-wave feminist ideas in hand to examine past women’s identities as contextual and to complicate stereotypical notions of “women’s work” (e.g., Ardren 2002, Wilkie 2003, Voss 2008a). Wedding age to gender has also highlighted the dynamism of identity—the processes and performances of socializations from cradle to grave (e.g., Geller 2004, Joyce 2000a, Lorentz 2008, Meskell 2000). Yet, researchers of childhood, a growing concern in the archaeology of gender (Baxter 2008), should tread lightly when seeking to find evasive little ones—i.e., children are the new women. To make something visible does not remedy “the basic problem that underwrites all processes of designation, that is, the lack of engagement with what resides outside names and categories, things that remain ‘unsaid’ or ‘invisible’” (Lazzari 2003, p. 195). Emphasizing in/visibility ultimately eclipses how an individual acquires personhood in a given cultural and social context.

Feminist-inspired studies of gender’s intersection with ethnicity, class, and race have also materialized difference and differentiation (e.g., Clark 2003, Delle et al. 2000). Conkey (2005), for example, outlines the potentials of an intersectional approach melding feminist and Indigenous concerns. Franklin (2001) recognizes that engagement with black feminist–inspired theory avoids homogenization of enslaved and freed Africans’ experiences by exposing “the simultaneous analysis of different vectors of oppression, including gender” (p. 112). Feminist-informed examinations of the African diaspora have indeed advanced archaeological inquiry (e.g., Rattle 2004, Galle & Young 2004). Wilkie’s (2003) consideration of mothering and midwifery in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries is a persuasive example. Chronicling the experiences of Lucrecia Perryman, a freed African American woman, mother, and midwife from Mobile, Alabama, Wilkie presents a politics and materiality of everyday life. By concentrating on the convergence of gender, race, and class, she elucidates black women’s oppression and negotiation of structural violence and inequities. Ultimately, theoretical intersection imparts history to the historically marginalized and dismantles the structural hierarchies of white supremacy. This decolonization is as much a political act as it is an intellectual one.

Additionally, feminist critiques of dichotomous, universalizing epistemology facilitate study of masculinity’s cultural construction and the diversity of men’s roles and relationships with others (Connell 1995, Gutmann 1997). That is, there are other ways to be a man than as a patriarchal, white, Western heterosexual. Archaeologists’ seminal studies of men and masculinity (e.g., Knapp 1998, Yates 1993), however, have yet to proliferate in the new millennium, exceptions notwithstanding (e.g., Alberti 2001, Ardren & Hixson 2006, Dean 2001,
Joyce 2000b). Perhaps the possible hazards are off-putting: reiteration of dichotomous, static thinking about gender; the possibility of masculinity’s irrelevance in an ancient context; unintended conveyance of modern ideas about violence, power, and sexuality. For example, masculinity and men are central in aforementioned studies of labor divisions, but interpretative shortcomings are obvious. The past is not diversely peopled and differentiation is not adequately addressed. Alberti (2006) stresses that archaeologists see material culture as constituting not reflecting identity. They can then identify the embodiment of masculinity in specific sociohistorical settings, as well as ascertain multiple and transgressive masculinities. The latter depart from idealized, hegemonic representations that may be presentist and/or exclusionary. Hence, the study of masculinity provides a bridge between feminist and queer studies.

Although some scholars regard queer studies as an intellectual departure, Jagose (1996) asserts that such scholarship “developed out of—and continues to be understandable in terms of—feminist knowledges” (p. 119). Her avowal echoes in the writings of those who question normative social structures, destabilize heterosexism, and allay homophobia (e.g., Butler 1990, 1993; de Lauretis 1991; Sedgwick 1990). Queer archaeologists similarly champion these efforts. They are aware that transplanting heteronormative notions into the past naturalizes contemporary Western social arrangements (Dowson 2000). To destabilize necessitates formulation of “queer” as a verb (Sullivan 2003, p. 50). Cobb’s (2005) aforementioned consideration of heteronormative hunter-gatherer studies provides one example, as does my own scrutiny of skeletal analysts’ determination of biological sex and subsequent social inferences (Geller 2005, 2008, 2009).

Queering also sheds light on “nonnormative” sexual relations not reducible to heterosexual procreation (Boellstorff 2007, Rubin 2002). For their part, archaeologists consider space, materiality, and imagery as evidence of same-sex intimacies (Casella 2000, Reeder 2000), religious celibacy (Gilchrist 2000), nonprocreative activities (Gero 2004), violent victimizations (Scott 2001), and commodified interactions (Seifert et al. 2000, Yamin 2005). Yet, it is crucial to exercise care with terminology (compare Bevan 2001, Schmidt 2002). For example, same-sex relations have a long (pre)history, but “homosexuality” is a nineteenth-century invention, which signals a paradigm shift in scientific understandings of sexuality and categorizations of psychological deviance and anatomical difference (Somerville 1997, pp. 37–38). To historicize acknowledges that persons who embodied transgressive identities or bent gender in archaeological contexts cannot be reduced to homosexuals [see Hollimon’s (2006) literature review].

Hollimon’s (1997, 2000, 2001) study of Native American two-spirits serves as an excellent case in point. Drawing on osteological, historic, and artifactual data, she determined that two-spirits, or ‘aqi, served as mortuary specialists in Chumash communities. For such persons, nonbinary gender categorizations applied, and nonprocreative sexual interactions were defining. Celibates, postmenopausal women, and third-gender males were all eligible. Inasmuch as Hollimon regards the body in terms of lived experience, she also offers a counterpoint to traditional investigations of labor divisions that assume much about sex, gender, and sexuality. To study embodied identity, then, one need not begin with queries about sexual difference predicated on reproductive ability. To this end, scholarship about the body fomented by postmodern, practice, and feminist theorists has been instructive (Bourdieu 1977; Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1978). Archaeologists expand these efforts by materializing embodiment and performance (Joyce 2005). Ultimately, consideration of individuals’ repetitive bodily performances or habitual practices, as transgression or reiteration of dominant ideology, facilitates interpretations about internalization and (re)formation of gender identities.

Many who study physical bodies are wary of applying abstract theorizing, however. In bioarchaeology, interchangeability of “sex” and “gender” is prevalent. Some concede
conceptual differences between the two but embrace second-wave understandings and lay investigative emphasis on sex (e.g., Armelagos 1998, Walker & Cook 1998). Or, some researchers assume that sexuality is biologically inaccessible, not realizing that concern for reproductive potential conveys heteronormative ideas about compulsory procreation and heterosexuality. Nonetheless, bioarchaeological inquiry informed by recent feminist-inspired theorizing will innovate studies about labor, health, warfare, violence, ritual, etc. (e.g., Hanks 2008, Lambert 2001, Novak 2006, Sofaer 2006). Perry’s (2004) study of a fourteenth-century Ancestral Pueblo, for instance, tested “whether symbolic gender divisions observed in multiple dimensions of social life indeed correspond to embodied (skeletal) realities in the practice of habitual labor” (p. 23). Skeletal signatures of key habitual activities indicated a sexual division of labor, verifying ethnographic accounts. Bone chemistry and mortuary studies also suggested that women were nutritionally disadvantaged and socially exploited. Although Perry’s study characterizes difference as dichotomy, she provides evidence for rather than presumes gendered labor divisions during a specific historical juncture. Comparing this period to preceding ones illuminates the processes of differentiation at work (Perry & Joyce 2001). However, Perry & Joyce (2001) also recognize that following formalization of *ibamata’s* ritual roles during this period, these transgendered persons may have used gender performances to transgress social regulations. Hence, bioarchaeological identification of these individuals will address how hegemonic structures are reproduced and subverted.

Bioarchaeology would be well suited to meet the challenges of “evidential constraints” (Wylie 1992) were it to complement the range of empirical resources utilized in studies with feminist perspectives. This approach also sees gender as multiscalar, from the long term and large scale to the local, everyday, and personal (Conkey 2003, Tringham 1994). The benefit is not one-way. Physiological processes are neither dismissed nor represented as destiny. Rather, bringing materiality and expansive temporal scale to the fore effectively grounds lived experiences via contextualized examination of bodies, spaces, and artifacts (Joyce 2008). These studies are a middle ground between biological determinism and postmodern nihilism, the latter being an accusation often leveled at third-wave feminism and queer studies.

ARCHAEOLOGY “UNDER ATTACK”

Studies of ancient bodies underscore that much intellectual labor is required to make often ethereal feminist ideas viable when analyzing the variability and materiality of gender. The difficulty of this effort is perhaps one reason why many archaeologists’ gender studies are unfeminist. I am intrigued by sustained resistance, and put forward additional explanations besides aversion for the highly conceptual.

As Conkey (2007a) discusses, archaeologists frequently slight theory building. Rather, fieldwork renders one a “real” practitioner of the discipline. More specifically, some scholars are ambivalent about theories that reveal contradictions, open new spaces, or challenge assumptions (p. 296). Perhaps opponents see the change effected as portending the field’s demise. I am reminded of one scholar’s recent comments that anthropological archaeology has been “under attack from postmodernism, postcolonialism, and feminism” (Flannery 2006, p. 1). Suffice it to say, prevailing positivist ideas, which simply reiterate common sense, are significantly less threatening.

Lather (2007, p. 113) suggests that confla
tion of -isms is a reaction born of androcentrism. Although this may be true, some women who undertake “gender archaeology” also shun contemporary feminist perspectives (e.g., Sorensen 2000, Whitehouse 2007). For instance, in their introductory words to the edited volume *Archaeology and Women*, Hamilton and coauthors (2007b) believe that archaeologists who subscribe to the third wave co-opt “feminist scholarship in the service of the
Third-wave scholarship, for them, emerged from Foucault’s analysis of sexuality and interrogation of sex’s fixity. Yet, the role of other gay and lesbian scholars goes unremarked upon, as does critical race theorists and postcolonial intellects’ shifting of the paradigm. The abbreviated, historical overview by Hamilton et al. therefore has the potential to generate misunderstanding of feminism’s intellectual developments and convergences.

To clarify, although feminism and postmodernism both destabilize Western thought’s epistemological foundations and grand narratives (Hekman 1990), their agendas are far from identical. Postmodernism’s deconstruction of objectivity and truth may be read as “an inversion that serves the interests of those who have always benefited from gender, race, and class privilege” (Wylie 2002, p. 190). Feminism’s commitment to decentering androcentric bias—whether from the vantage of socialist, radical, Black, lesbian, postcolonial, or postmodern feminisms—offers a challenge and different direction. Even feminists who engage with postmodern perspectives recognize the difficulty of reconciling the latter’s relativism with the former’s political agenda (e.g., Hekman 1990, Nicholson 1990). At issue is theory’s relationship to practice, a point MacKinnon (1991) articulates. Without denying the diversity of women’s lived experiences, she asserts, “The postmodern version of the relation between theory and practice is discourse unto death.... It proceeds as if you can deconstruct power relations by shifting their markers around in your head” (p. 13). Granted, MacKinnon chastises a version of postmodernism that may be passé in the twenty-first century. Yet, her point about the centrality of praxis in feminism remains salient. To put feminist theory into practice emancipates all from social intolerance, professional discrimination, and oppressive political policies.

Feminism’s introduction into the academy was driven by scholars’ personal and political leanings. In turn, academic feminists’ scientific critiques and expanded research interests had an impact outside of the academy walls. Yet, feminist archaeologists’ overt acknowledgment of sociopolitical causes and effects continues to induce angst (Wylie 2007). Perhaps adversaries imagine guerrillas in their midst and look to defend themselves against further attacks. Or, do some archaeologists of gender believe we are postfeminist and see politicization as gratuitous? Hamilton and coauthors (2007b) have commented that “marked androcentric bias... has characterized the discipline until recently” (p. 18; emphasis added). Because their volume also contains a chapter about the underrepresentation of women in British contract archaeology [by Hamilton (2007) herself], it is not clear to me how the discipline is less androcentric of late. So, is archaeology no longer androcentric, or is androcentrism in archaeology no longer so marked? For those who wish to see gender gain mainstream acceptance in archaeological inquiry but concomitantly spurn feminist perspectives (e.g., Sørenson 2000), the latter seems to be the case. Yet, to study gender exposes significant shortcomings in mainstream archaeology, not the least of which are the subtle institutional practices and ideological beliefs that have marginalized the topic. A shift in the mainstream is imperative.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF GENDER AND SOCIOPOLITICAL AGENDAS

Feminist archaeologists see a sociopolitical commitment to emancipation as transforming the discipline’s present-day practices and reconstructions of the past. Both aims hinge on diversification of the field. Early on, critical feminist perspectives effectively revealed professional gender disparity (e.g., Nelson et al. 1994). Remediying such inequity has been another matter. Recent findings indicate that engendering gender parity is an exercise in imagination not realization. An American Association of University Professors report found that women faculty earn less than men do and are less likely to hold full-time positions,
especially tenure-track ones (West & Curtis 2006, p. 6). An “extremely optimistic” hypothetical projection that parity will be achieved in 57 years, provided hiring and retention of men and women stay equal (p. 8), will assuredly try even the most patient.

Closer to home, the Committee on the Status of Women in Anthropology’s Academic Climate Report drew similar conclusions (Wasson et al. 2008). Compilers were confounded: “Since we tend to think of anthropology as a discipline populated by fairly progressive people, we were surprised at the extent of the gender inequities that we uncovered” (p. 2). Leaky pipelines, maternal walls, and old boys’ networks remain obstacles. The report also assessed anthropology’s climate in terms of plurality—the impact that practitioners’ race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and national identity have on representation and experience. It is telling that aside from race, quantitative analysis was unfeasible given insufficient numbers for “statistically valid conclusions” (p. 22). An inability to quantify difference perhaps speaks to the lack of it.

It is unsurprising then that the subfield of archaeology does not diverge from broader trends. Persistence of gender disparity provides evidence of sustained resistance to incorporate feminist-inspired critiques. Women archaeologists account for almost half of the Society for American Archaeology’s membership. Yet, as Conkey (2007a, p. 295) pronounces, they “are still grossly under-represented among the faculty of our major PhD institutions.” The 2005 Salary Survey offers support. According to the survey, with few exceptions, a gendered disparity in salary exists regardless of the primary employer (i.e., university, CRM firm, federal or state government, private nonprofit, museum). On average, women make substantially less than men do, $46,786 to $53,210 respectively (p. 2). Additionally, the number of men exceeds women in all positions aside from ones that are temporary or stress “housekeeping” (per Gero 1985). As of 2001, females account for ∼40% of PhDs awarded in archaeology (Patterson et al. 2004), but the pipeline leaks as one ascends the hierarchical structure. Age and experience cannot wholly account for such gaps. The masculinist frame of intellectual socialization and practical training contributes to some of this inequality (Conkey 2007a, Moser 2007). Continued accumulation of dis/advantage resulting from entrenched gender schema (Valian 1998) is certainly a factor, as well.

I have yet to unearth surveys about professional disparity with regard to archaeologists’ race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. From informal documentation, there are 17 living Native Americans who have completed PhDs in archaeology or on issues that bridge sociocultural anthropology and archaeology, and ∼5 students are currently undertaking doctoral research (K. Thompson, personal communication, 2009). And, Franklin (1997) has lamented, “There are only a handful of African Americans in the US with PhDs who specialize in anthropological archaeology (four, by my count)” (p. 799). Although this number may have increased, even if quadrupled it would be insignificant in light of the fact that the SAA boasts over 7000 members. Promotion of a more equitable, diverse field is crucial. And, to this end, Norder & Rizvi (2008) make several recommendations to the SAA pertaining to accountability, mentoring, liaising, and lobbying.

Of course the critical may question why we need a more diverse field. As Wylie (2002) explains professional gender equity can ameliorate “androcentric or sexist bias in the content of archaeological accounts” (p. 188). She finds Gero’s (1993) assessment of Paleoindian researchers (who are mostly male) and their primary research interests (which are mostly stereotypical male activities like big game hunting) to be an illustrative example. Beyond gender, several feminist-inspired archaeologists have drawn from their own marginalized positions, personal experiences, and embodied differences to pose questions that diverge from traditional inquiries about race, ethnicity, or sexuality (e.g., Battle-Baptiste 2007, Dowson 2006). If we allow that knowledge is situated, then diversification of the field will permit exploration of different ways
to be human, an outcome that benefits the discipline as a whole.

By subverting received wisdom about difference, feminist archaeology can contribute to pressing sociopolitical concerns. Several issues bandied about in popular and political forums are problematically painted as universal and natural. Much discussed in today’s political climate is the sanctity of marriage as only and ever between a man and a woman. Archaeologists’ aforementioned studies of same-sex intimacies, therefore, have the potential to dispel the myth of the naturalness of the marital contract and subsequently mitigate homophobia. Additionally, exploration of reproductive strategizing—without essentializing or naturalizing—can unearth information about culturally specific birthing practices, folk knowledge, and natural contraceptives and abortifacients (e.g., Geller & Stockett 2006a, Wilkie 2003). Such studies may provide alternatives to modern political rhetoric and biomedical practices that disempower or do women harm.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND BIGGER PICTURES

An archaeology of gender undergirded by feminist perspectives peoples the past and diversifies the present. It also requires practitioners to reflect on self and scientific production. To this end, such a study begs a bigger question that all archaeologists need ponder: Why do we investigate the past? What follows is my answer to this query.

Like many academic archaeologists, I teach an introductory course to the subfield. Feminist-inspired thought grounds the course’s content, critical lens, and pedagogy (see also Arnold 2005, Hendon 2006). This approach is less obvious to undergraduates who often have little exposure to archaeology and even less to feminism. At other junctures in the semester, however, the use of a feminist perspective is explicit. Namely, I assign students Spector’s (1993) What This Awl Means, a book that eloquently illustrates the aims, issues, and practice of feminist archaeology per Wylie’s criteria (2007, pp. 211–13). Spector begins from a place of everyday, personal experience; asks questions that challenge oppressive sex/gender systems and racist attitudes; reflects critically on her social context and knowledge production; and democratizes and decolonizes archaeological practice by collaborating with the descendant Dakota community. After 16 years, What This Awl Means remains cogent and relevant.

In conjunction with this book, I use a mainstream textbook by Renfrew & Bahn, Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practices. In recent qualitative teaching evaluations, few students commented on this text, aside from remarks about its density. Regarding our foray into feminist archaeology, however, one student wrote, “The whole feminism thing rubbed me the wrong way. I had signed up for an archaeology class not a gender studies class.” Did my anonymous reviewer’s disquietude signal a failure on my part to instruct and inspire? Perhaps. But, such anxiety may also signal a raised conscious, a boundary transgressed, which—in the spirit of hooks’ engaged pedagogy—heralds “the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (1994, p. 13).

An archaeology inspired by feminism can empower those whom we educate in a way that is germane, interesting, accessible, and transformative. Accordingly, archaeology will remain relevant in the twenty-first century within and beyond the academy. As it stands now, however, the field has become insular if our interactions with varied publics are any indicator. Clearly, nonarchaeologists have an interest in the past. There is constant usurpation and consumption—by students, museum patrons, tourists, antiquities collectors, religious fundamentalists, and popular media. Archaeologists, however, are frequently not responsible for dissemination of information. And, all too often the research questions we pose, the reconstructions we create, are of little interest to anyone other than specialists. Though not the only ones to find this inability to communicate with nonarchaeologists vexing,
feminist archaeologists have produced creative ways to interact with publics, digital media and hypertext narratives being two recent developments (Joyce & Tringham 2007).

Yet, as my student’s comments remind me, to implement a feminist-inspired archaeology, in the study of gender specifically and the discipline more broadly, does not always mean that others will gain comfort by the demands of such engagement. And, we need to be okay with their unease at our destabilizing and reconstructing. Such is the only way to effect change.

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