

Doing Archaeology as a Feminist

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Introduction: Doing Archaeology as a Feminist

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Abstract: Gender research archaeology has made significant contributions, but its dissociation from the resources of feminist scholarship and feminist activism is a significantly limiting factor in its development. The essays that make up this special issue illustrate what is to be gained by making systematic use of these resources. Their distinctively feminist contributions are characterized in terms of the guidelines for “doing science as a feminist” that have taken shape in the context of the long running “feminist method debate” in the social sciences.

There is now a rich and expansive body of archaeological research on women and gender, a dramatic development in less than two decades. But despite taking shape at a point when vigorous traditions of feminist research were already well established in socio-cultural anthropology, history, and geography, among other closely aligned fields, the feminist affiliations of “gender archaeology” have always been vexed. Hanen and Kelley (1992) noted, with some surprise, a dearth of feminist content in the abstracts submitted for the first public North American conference on “The Archaeology of Gender,” the 1989 Chacmool Conference (Walde and Willows 1991). They found that 80% of contributors avoided the use of terms such as feminist or feminism, and few made any reference to feminist literature, authors, influences, or ideas (1992: 198). When I undertook a survey of Chacmool contributors in 1990-1991, I learned that this accurately reflected the self-reported familiarity of most participants with feminist research in other fields and with feminist activism; although a majority said they had a pre-existing interest in research on gender, barely half identified as feminists and many registered strong reservations about the label (Wylie 1992, 1997: 94-95). Conkey and Gero (1997) have since argued that this dissociation from feminist scholarship and politics continues to characterize archaeological research in the “gender genre.”

While this lack of engagement with feminism might initially have seemed inadvertent—a function of the androcentrism of existing disciplinary traditions in archaeology and perhaps uncertainty about where to find intellectual resources relevant to newly framed questions about women and gender—it is now clear that it reflects much deeper ambivalence about feminist scholarship and activism. As Engelstad describes in her contribution to this special issue, after a decade of highly productive research in the “gender genre,” several of its strongest advocates have publically endorsed the dissociation from feminism as an explicit commitment of gender archaeology. In one especially uncompromising statement, Sørensen (2000) claims that gender archaeology has been deeply influenced by feminism and must distance itself from these “political overtones and associations” if it is to flourish and be taken seriously by “the established structures” of mainstream archaeology within which gender research is viewed “with suspicion” (2000:5). Sørensen characterizes these feminist influences in terms of popular stereotypes that evoke a cartoonish version of 1970s radical or cultural feminism and a 1990s anxiety about identity politics; it is a “passive and merely reactionary” feminism predicated on commitment to an essentialist politics of gender difference (2000: 5). Her own book, *Gender Archaeology*, is intended to be a corrective; what is required, she argues, is a more complex, archaeological serviceable conception of gender which is to be gained only by “shredding... the more political implications signaled by ‘woman’” (2000: 11).

It is ironic that feminism should be credited with such having a powerful (negative) effect on gender archaeology, given the lack of feminist engagement that characterizes its Anglo-American formation, as documented by Hanen and Kelley (1992), by Conkey and Gero (1997) and now, by Engelstad. It is even more ironic that Sørensen should attribute a lack of sophistication in theorizing gender to compromising feminist influences. Hanen and Kelly registered concern fifteen years ago that gender research in archaeology could not be expected to flourish intellectually unless it took advantage of what had been learned over several decades by feminist scholars in related fields. In particular, as the Norwegian founders of *K.A.N.* discussed by Engelstad argued in the mid-1980s, this accumulated wisdom would be especially crucial if archaeologists were to articulate a conception of gender as a category of analysis that avoids the well known pitfalls of a narrow gender-essentialism. By the time gender archaeology began to take shape in Anglo-American contexts the universalizing, reifying assumptions about gender that

concern Sørensen had been the focus of protracted debate for most of a decade; this fractious, dynamic tradition of thinking about “sex/gender systems” (Harding 1983) has been transformed by trenchant criticism and by empirical, practical engagements that demonstrate the irreducibly contingent, intersectional nature of gender constructs. It offers rich resources for archaeological research, especially as feminists turn away from the most extreme constructivist, performative models of gender that arose in reaction against gender essentialism, and consider the ways in which gender identities are physically embodied, the material consequences of institutional structures and inequalities that track social differentiation along gender lines (e.g., Moya and Hames-García 2000, Alcoff 2006).

The catalyst for this special issue of the *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* is a conviction that it is premature to foreclose on the possibility that archaeology may have much to gain from, and much to contribute to, the highly sophisticated, diverse and rapidly evolving traditions of feminist research. Indeed, the contributors to this issue each argue, with respect to different aspects of archaeological practice, that it is the dissociation of “gender research” from feminist scholarship, not its association with feminism, that should be a matter of serious concern. The pivotal question is, then, what does feminist scholarship and feminist politics have to offer archaeology? What are the implications of bringing the resources of an explicitly feminist perspective to bear on the practice of archaeology?

Several of the essays included in this issue originated in a seminar sponsored by the School of American Research in April 1998, and in that context our focal question was: What does it mean to do archaeology as a feminist? This question had been pivotal to the “feminist method debate” since the late 1980s when feminist social scientists and philosophers of science had argued that it is counterproductive to seek a distinctive method, or a uniquely feminist form of inquiry—a “feminist science”—that could counteract the androcentrism and sexism they found so pervasive in mainstream research traditions, and that would be uniquely appropriate for addressing the questions, so often neglected or marginalized, that especially matter to women and to feminists. Longino had argued that it is more fruitful to ask what it means to “do science as a feminist” (Longino 1987: 53), and to recognize that what this means in practice will be as diverse as what it means to be a feminist and as situationally specific as the fields in which feminists have undertaken to “do science.”

In this spirit, feminist social scientists have formulated a wide range of guidelines for doing research in their various fields as feminists (Eichler 1988, Fonow and Cook 1991, Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004, Hesse-Biber 2007). These converge on four widely shared commitments (Wylie 2007). The first is typically a specification of the goals of feminist research; to do research as a feminist means to address questions that are relevant to women or, more generally, to those oppressed by gender-structured systems of inequality, and that provide the kinds of understanding feminists need to bring about change in these oppressive conditions. A second is the directive, variously formulated, that feminists should ground their research in the situated experience of women and those marginalized by conventional sex/gender structures. As articulated by Smith in the early 1970s, and subsequently elaborated by Harding (1993), this is a recommendation that feminists should take women’s everyday lives as a “starting point” point for research; they should pursue questions and adopt strategies of inquiry that bring into focus those (gendered) aspects of social life and forms of understanding that typically remain “off-stage,” “eclipsed” by the normatively masculine focus of conventional social sciences (Smith 1974; 1987: 85). Pitched debate over the status and authority of the “evidence of experience” (Scott 1991) has countered any tendency to treat experience as a given or as automatically authoritative, as epistemically foundational (Wylie 1992). Gendered experience and self-understanding is a critical resource for feminist researchers—in understanding where the limitations of extant research traditions lie, in framing new research questions, in expanding the repertoire of interpretive or explanatory hypotheses, and in adjudicating the plausibility of descriptive and analytic constructs—but it is always open to critical scrutiny. One especially compelling account of how gendered experience and feminist values can productively inform research at all these levels is to be found in Anderson (2004).

A third cluster of principles specify ethical and pragmatic norms for feminist research; feminists should be accountable to research subjects and to those who are affected by the research process and its outcomes. At the very least, feminist research should not be, in itself, an exploitative practice; ideally it should be a site for instituting feminist social and political values. Doing science as a feminist in this

sense means implementing egalitarian, collaborative forms of knowledge production, designed to counteract the power dynamics and hierarchies that characterize social science when constituted as a form of “ruling practice” (Smith 1974). In this, the defining commitments of feminist practice converge, on one hand, on the ideals that animate various forms of participatory action research and community based collaborative research and, on the other, on the epistemic arguments for “democratizing” science developed by Longino (2002). For Longino, conditions of broad participation are instrumental to epistemic ends; only when a research community succeeds in bringing diverse critical perspectives to bear on its focal claims, and in ensuring that these get uptake, is it justified in ratifying the knowledge claims that result from its processes of inquiry. She makes the case for a conception of objectivity that gives priority to these procedural requirements; what justifies a claim to objectivity is not a presumption of neutrality—the emulation of a “view from nowhere”—but accountability for the interests that unavoidably inform inquiry, embodied in community mechanisms of transformative criticism.

Finally, virtually all the guidelines articulated for doing social research as a feminist make a central virtue of reflexivity. The point of departure here is the recognition, arising from feminist science studies, that all aspects of research—its presuppositions, its conventions of practice, its products—reflect the situated, pragmatic interests of its makers. But rather than issuing in a cynical denunciation of science and of ideals of objectivity, this insight underwrites a commitment to raise the bar epistemically; it is the point of departure for the argument that doing social science as a feminist requires building into research practice a systematic critical appreciation of the contingency, the cultural and pragmatic specificity of inquiry. This directive extends not only to established disciplinary traditions, but also to the counter-traditions developed by feminist researchers. At the very least, the directive to cultivate a stance of critical reflexivity requires feminist social scientists to contextualize their research: “to state their premises rather than hide them” (Reinharz, 1992: 426). On stronger formulations it requires that they take into account the various ways in which their own social location, their interests and values, are constitutive of the research process and of the understanding it produces (e.g., Fonow and Cook, 1991; Mies, 1983). Harding characterizes this as a requirement for “strong objectivity”: the tools of jointly empirical and conceptual inquiry should be applied (reflexively) to the research process itself, in effect indexing and calibrating its results to the conditions of its production (Harding 1987, 1993).

At a meta-level, Longino has argued the case for a governing principle of “methodological provisionalism”: feminists should be prepared to revise any of their other norms to revision in light of what they learn from practice (1994: 483). The justification for all these principles, and the basis for assessing and revising them, is a what Longino describes as a “bottom line” feminist commitment: that any methodological norms adopted by feminists should they “prevent gender from being disappeared” (1994: 481). Note that, on these principles, it is an open question whether, or in what form, gender will prove to be a relevant axis of difference in any given domain of inquiry; these are questions that can only be settled through systematic empirical inquiry and probing conceptual analysis. What doing research as a feminist requires is that such questions be kept open and on the research agenda, and that the presuppositions as well as the results of inquiry be held accountable to what feminists learn in the course of pursuing these questions.

Each of these guidelines is exemplified, in diverse ways, by the contributions to this special issue. Gender research in archaeology has very effectively moved neglected questions about women and gender onto the research agenda of the field. In doing this, I have argued, gender researchers draw on the resources of their situated, gendered experience in a discipline in which significant changes in the representation of women have destabilized at least some settled assumptions about women’s capabilities and roles (Wylie 1992, 1997). What a feminist perspective brings to bear is a critical, theoretically and empirically informed, *standpoint* on knowledge production. This is embodied, in the present papers, in sustained analyses of how the culture and institutions of archaeology reproduce gender-normative conventions not just in the questions asked and variables considered, but in tacit assumptions that structure the terms on which these questions, these aspects of the cultural subject, can be engaged (Wylie 2003). For example, Moser and Tomášková interrogate the masculine norms that structure archaeological fieldwork and, crucially, the implications of the role of fieldwork as a primary context of professional socialization and as the defining core of disciplinary identity in archaeology. Moser raises challenging questions about the implications of this aspect of disciplinary practice for patterns of recruitment to and community dynamics in archaeology; however unintentional these may be, they are powerful “gatekeeping” forces that

effectively limit, in background, the forms of situated knowledge—the range of epistemic resources—that structure, in foreground, the research agenda and the norms of credibility of the discipline. In a complementary analysis of the “gender of theory,” Conkey traces the effects of gendered differences in uptake and response—“techniques of marginalization”—that are often unintended and unrecognized but that determine what counts as theory, and who will be counted a theorist. The implications are as profound as the mechanisms are subtle; again, they work in background, entrenching norms of credibility that may not be gendered on their face—like a commitment to simplicity, a preference for context-stripping generality—but that work systematically to “disappear gender,” exactly as Longino has described with reference to the preferences for ontological and causal simplicity in the life sciences (1994, 1995).

Stepping back from the specifics of archaeological fieldwork and theory, Gero identifies pervasive epistemic and ontological norms—the impulse to seek closure, to reduce complexity and ambiguity—that underlie and that, in diverse ways, prefigure archaeological practice in all its forms. These are “community values,” as Longino refers to them, that come to be seen as inevitable, foundational commitments of practice, even though they are inevitably the product of specific trajectories of disciplinary development, underdetermined empirically and conceptually. In taking distance from and critically appraising these features of disciplinary practice, each of these contributors show what is to be gained by grounding analysis, not just in their situated experience, but in an explicitly feminist standpoint. This puts them in a position to push reflexive analysis beyond the demand that neglected questions be addressed, and to offer a diagnosis of the conditions—the underlying assumptions, forms of practice, epistemic norms—that reproduce, often inadvertently, the gaps and distortions that gender archaeology is intent on correcting.

In different ways and to varying degrees, the contributors to this special issue all consider, as well, the prospects for turning these critical insights to constructive purpose. Moser, Conkey, and Gero argue for precisely the kinds of accountability—for recovering the historical contingencies that gave rise to the “community values” that configure contemporary archaeology in its various contexts of practice—that feminists have made the cornerstone of feminist practice in a range of social sciences. “Contextualizing” inquiry, delineating its distinctive forms of partiality, provides a substantive basis for identifying currently marginalized perspectives that can provide especially fruitful starting points for inquiry, and that promise the resources for transformative criticism. Tomášková considers the possibilities that open up when the assumptions about purpose and epistemic credibility that underpin entrenched mapping conventions are made explicit; she identifies a range of promising alternatives exemplified by the practice of feminist geographers. In this spirit, Joyce and Tringham offer a sustained and richly illustrated argument for recognizing, in digital and hypertext media, a rich resource for feminist practice. Not only do these media vastly expand the reach of archaeological communication, but crucially, they can reconfigure the ways archaeologists engage with diverse communities of specialists and non-specialists. Tringham focuses on archaeological image making and the potential for building thoroughly pluralistic and interactive forms of visualization while Joyce calls for a resolutely multi-vocal, “heterarchical” exploration of past landscapes. Both urge strategies for using these technologies to diffuse conventional hierarchies of authority and engage diversely situated interlocutors. And in this they see the potential for instituting just the kinds of collaborative, democratized forms of practice that feminists have advocated, on both normative (ethical and political) and epistemic grounds, and that have struggled to realize in a range of scholarly and activist contexts.

The challenge addressed in these papers is, then, how to develop an archaeology that takes account of its own partiality, while at the same time making full use of its potential, as an empirical discipline, to disrupt settled assumptions and teach us new things about the cultural past and ourselves. Gender archaeology has certainly contributed, and will continue to contribute, important insights about the complexity of the cultural past. But it is a self-consciously feminist archaeology that holds the prospect for reframing research practice at a deeper level, given feminist commitments to take account of, and to be accountable for, the epistemic and political commitments that inform research practice. With this broad vision of feminist engagement as a touchstone, the question of what it means to do archaeology as a feminist becomes that of how feminist commitments can foster a conceptually richer, empirically more robust, and more broadly accountable responsible archaeology for the future.

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