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Source: *World Archaeology*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Queer Archaeologies (Oct., 2000), pp. 180-192

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/827864>

Accessed: 23-08-2015 06:25 UTC

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Feminisms, queer theories, and the archaeological study of past sexualities

Barbara L. Voss

Abstract

Archaeology faces the unique challenge of stretching social theories of sexuality in new chronological and methodological directions. This essay uses an analysis of citational practices to consider how feminist and queer theories articulate with archaeological investigations of sexuality. Both queer theories and feminist archaeological practices are shown to be powerful tools that can be used to expand archaeological interpretations of gender and sexuality.

Keywords

Sexuality; gender; queer theory; feminism; history of archaeology.

There is another social function of gender to be considered and that is the social marking of sexually appropriate partners. . . . If the reader accepts this social function of gender, then an archaeology of gender is an archaeology of *sexuality*.

(Claassen 1992b)

Gender is out – sex is in.

(dig house graffiti, Çatalhöyük, Turkey, 1998)

It has been eight years since Claassen observed that sexuality is intrinsically linked to the archaeological study of gender in the past, but until recently only a few archaeologists have seriously considered how the archaeological record can be used to produce knowledge about past sexualities. Fortunately, in the last three years this situation has significantly changed. There is now emerging a significant corpus of discourse about sexuality and the archaeological record, a constellation of recent publications and theses that demonstrate that an ever-increasing range of sexual topics can be investigated and interrogated through archaeological research.

A review of archaeological studies of sexuality is in some ways premature, for (despite an anonymous archaeologist's glib assertion that 'sex is in') the undertaking is still controversial and contested. Yet even at this early date it is clear that archaeological investigations



World Archaeology Vol. 32(2): 180–192 *Queer Archaeologies*
© 2000 Taylor & Francis Ltd ISSN 0043-8243 print/1470-1375 online

of sexuality are being informed and influenced by several distinct – and at times competing – intellectual traditions. In this essay, I particularly consider how feminist archaeology and queer theory articulate with archaeological investigations of sexuality. To do so I step back in time, as archaeologists are wont to do, and discuss the genesis of both feminist archaeology and queer theory in the 1980s and 1990s, examining their relationship to each other through an analysis of citational practices in archaeology. This discussion not only contributes to a review of archaeological research on sexuality but also towards discussions on the sociology of knowledge in archaeology.

Feminist archaeologies: gender, status, and the division of labour

The emergence of feminist archaeology is generally attributed to the 1984 publication 'Archaeology and the study of gender' (Conkey and Spector 1984). By the late 1980s, symposia, workshops, and dedicated conferences brought together researchers interested in integrating archaeology, feminist theory, women's studies, and the interpretation of a gendered past. A bloom of publications followed, including the edited volume *Engendering Archaeology* (Gero and Conkey 1991), five conference proceedings (Balme and Beck 1995; Claassen 1992a; du Cros and Smith 1993; Miller 1988; Walde and Willows 1991), a special issue of *Historical Archaeology* (Seifert 1991), and several topical monographs (e.g. Ehrenberg 1989; Gilchrist 1994; Spector 1993; Wall 1994). Not all the researchers involved in these projects necessarily identified themselves or their work as 'feminist' (Wylie 1997b). Recent commentaries have thus referred to this body of literature as 'womanist' or 'gender' archaeology (e.g., Joyce and Claassen 1997; Gilchrist 1999; Nelson 1997; Wright 2000). These commentators and others are correct in emphasizing that research on women or gender is not automatically 'feminist'. Nonetheless, I believe that most of the works listed above can be accurately described as 'feminist-inspired', informed by popular, political, and/or academic feminist thought. Additionally, feminist practice in archaeology certainly has not been limited to research on women or gender (Conkey and Wylie 1999; Wylie in press). Because of this, for the purposes of this essay I have chosen to refer to this body of work as 'feminist archaeology'.

The development of this diverse body of 'feminist' and 'feminist-inspired' archaeologies occurred at a time when feminist theory and politics in the United States and elsewhere were at a crossroads. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Conkey and Spector were authoring their 1984 manifesto, North American feminist politics were focused on what then appeared to be the universal oppression of women by patriarchy. Although the exact nature and mechanisms of patriarchal oppression were debated, this focus was generally (but of course not completely) shared by Marxist, socialist, radical, liberal, and cultural feminisms of the time (Jagger 1983: 5–8). In both the humanities and sciences, the omission of women's experiences and accomplishments in academic and popular discourse was identified as one mechanism by which patriarchal ideology replicated itself by privileging male experience. Feminist scholars in anthropology and other disciplines thus prioritized research that documented women's experiences cross-culturally, especially regarding gender roles and the ways that patriarchy acted on women's lives (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Rubin 1975; Reiter 1975).

Informed by this political and academic climate, Conkey and Spector's 1984 article presented a substantial critique of androcentrism in archaeology. They called for new approaches to archaeological interpretation that would promote gender-inclusive models of the past, question the universality of a rigid sexual division of labour, and challenge the ways that men's purported activities are valued more than those believed to be performed by women. In this way feminist theory would be used in archaeology to combat the effects of present-day sexism on archaeological interpretations. Simultaneously, the critical study of gender in the past would provide new information about the long-term history of gender relations. This core agenda was later reiterated by Conkey and Gero in their 1991 edited volume *Engendering Archaeology* with the added aim of problematizing 'underlying assumptions about gender and difference' (Conkey and Gero 1991: 5). Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, these goals were largely adopted by most researchers who identified their research as feminist archaeology, gender archaeology, or the archaeology of women. It is perhaps worth noting that these general aims of feminist archaeology are broadly congruent with feminist interventions into the social sciences in general (Harding 1986, 1987; Wylie 1992, 1997a).

Because Conkey and Spector's 1984 article was widely adopted as a central agenda for feminist archaeological studies for the decade to come, the political and intellectual climate within which they wrote significantly affected the way that sexuality has been addressed within archaeological interpretations. Most of the early studies in archaeology that consciously adopted a feminist approach emphasized the sexual (or gendered) division of labour and indices of gender status, an emphasis typified by Spector's task differentiation framework (Conkey and Spector 1984; Spector 1991). There was a particular emphasis on 'finding' women in the archaeological record by debunking androcentric methods and interpretations, and on highlighting the contributions of women to the past (e.g. Brumfiel 1991; Gero 1991; Wright 1991). At the same time many studies used a materialist approach that viewed women as a gender class, trying to understand how archaeologically identified conditions such as environmental change, state formation, or the introduction of agriculture intensified or changed women's status (e.g. Claassen 1991; Hastorf 1991; Watson and Kennedy 1991). The prominence of materialist and empiricist research in North American feminist archaeology has been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Gilchrist 1999: ch. 3; Nelson 1997: ch. 5; Wylie 1996: 320–5) and is attributable to both the then-dominant 'New Archaeology' paradigm and also the emphasis on socialist political theory in North American feminism in the 1970s and early 1980s.

These shared emphases in early feminist archaeological studies had significant implications for the ways that issues of sexuality began to be discussed in archaeological interpretation. Feminist archaeologists usually adopted the sex/gender system model, in which gender is taken to be the cultural expression of biological sex (Rubin 1975). Within this framework, sexuality is generally seen as derivative of gender, one of many aspects of social life that is structured by sex/gender systems. As a result, to paraphrase Brumfiel (1992), during the first decade of feminist archaeological practice, 'Gender . . . [stole] the show'. Feminist archaeological research rarely addressed the topic of sexuality, instead treating sexuality predominantly as a function of gender rather than as a distinct aspect of social relations (see Rubin 1984: 309 for a general discussion of this point). For example, heterosexual marriage has been examined by many feminist archaeologists as a locus for

the gendered organization of labour (which, of course, it often is) but only rarely with a consideration of how marriage relates to the regulation and expression of sexuality (e.g. Deagan 1983; Gibb and King 1991; Jackson 1991; Wall 1994; Wright 1991).

In noting these trends, I am not suggesting that the initial goals of feminist-inspired archaeological projects negatively affected archaeological interpretations of sexuality. On the contrary, by highlighting gender as a subject of archaeological research, and by foregrounding interpersonal relationships as an arena of social action, feminist interventions in archaeology created an intellectual climate within which research on sexuality became increasingly viable. Exactly how the priorities and conventions of feminist archaeological practices came to influence archaeological investigations of sexuality is, however, of great interest, and is a topic that I return to later in this essay.

The Sex Wars, AIDS, and queer theory: sexuality moves front and centre

During the emergence of feminist archaeologies in the 1980s and early 1990s, North American feminist politics negotiated a series of epistemological crises that shifted feminist attention towards an examination of differences between women. Among other issues such as race and class, feminist scholars and activists undertook projects that theorized sexuality in ways markedly different from previous treatments of sexuality as some sort of an extension of gender. In the late 1970s works by lesbian and gay scholars (e.g. Katz 1976; Rowbotham and Weeks 1977; Smith-Rosenberg 1979; Weeks 1977), the English translation of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978), and, in anthropology, Ortner and Whitehead's *Sexual Meanings* (1981) challenged conventional feminist wisdom about the primacy of gender as a vector of oppression. By the early 1980s sexuality had become a flashpoint of feminist debate (the so-called 'Sex Wars'), and the relationship of sexuality to patriarchy and liberation was hotly contested (Rubin 1984; Vance 1984; Duggan and Hunter 1995). Homosexuality, pornography, sadomasochism, prostitution, monogamy, rape, promiscuity, butch-femme relationships, interracial and intergenerational sex – these and other sexual practices became prominent topics of often acrimonious public forums and written discourse. Concurrently, the emerging AIDS pandemic propelled male same-sex sexual practices and commercial sex into explicit public discussion through medical, public health, and activist movements, bringing coverage of condom distribution, prostitution, anal and oral sex, and public sex into mainstream print and television media.¹

Discussions about the politics of sexuality during the early and mid-1980s were at times bitter (see, for example, Vance's discussion of the 1982 Barnard College conference (Vance 1984) or Crimp and Roston's pictorial history of ACT UP (Crimp and Rolston 1990)), but it would be a mistake to characterize this period solely as an era of contentious debate. As Rubin urged, 'The time has come to think about sex' (1984: 267) and thinking about sex was precisely what many feminist, lesbian, and gay researchers, writers, and activists did. What emerged was a sense that theories of gender were not fully adequate to address sexuality, either as a social practice or as a vector of oppression (Vance 1984: 10): that 'it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to more accurately reflect their separate social existence' (Rubin 1984: 308). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the call to develop theories of sexuality was being answered by an expanding body of

literature that addressed the political and cultural positions of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, sex workers, sadomasochists, and others – a diverse conglomeration of sexual ‘minorities’ who were increasingly identified as ‘queer’ (de Lauretis 1991: v). Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993a), Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) and two special issues of *differences* (Vol. 5 No. 2 and Vol. 6 Nos. 2 + 3) all signalled the consolidation of an approach to theorizing sexuality that crossed gender lines, integrating (but not collapsing) sexual theories related to masculinity and femininity and to heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Most importantly, the emergence of queer theory within academia marked a radical shift towards positioning abject and stigmatized sexual identities as important entry points to the production of knowledge (Butler 1993b). A move to destabilize sexual and gender categories was and still is an integral part of this process. The adoption of the inclusive moniker ‘queer’ reflected the rejection of taxonomic sexual categories (e.g. homosexual, heterosexual, fetishist, pederast) that initially had been established through sexological discourse in the late 1800s and early 1900s (see Bland and Doan (1998) for a discussion of sexology and sexual taxonomies). Instead, the term ‘queer’ reflects an inclusive standpoint based on difference from or opposition to the ideology of heteronormativity (Warner 1993: xxiii). Thus queer theory and queer politics represent a critical moment in the history of Western sexuality in which sexual minorities and deviants who were previously defined by legal statutes and medical/psychological diagnoses are instead creating an always-contested and re-negotiated group identity based on difference from the norm – in other words, a postmodern version of identity politics (see Butler 1993a: 21). Essential to this post-structuralist deployment of opposition is the tenet that what is ‘normative’ is actually constructed through reference to deviance. Thus it is ‘deviance’ that is foundational and the ‘normative’ that is unstable (Butler 1993b).

This emphasis on ‘opposition to the normative’ (a position repeated in the call for papers for this volume) and on the simultaneous destabilization of the normative are aspects of queer theory that allow great interdisciplinary mobility, as they permit theoretical concepts initially applied to issues of sexual identity and the oppression of sexual minorities to be deployed in studies of other social subgroups as well as in studies of the written and spoken word, the built environment, material objects, and other products of culture. It is, I argue below, precisely this emphasis on normativity and opposition that poses both opportunities and challenges for archaeologists engaging in studies of past sexualities.

Intersections: connections between archaeology and feminist theories of sexuality

These brief histories reveal that feminist archaeology and queer theory share certain temporal markers: both were founded on the political and academic feminisms of the late 1970s and early 1980s, emerged in opposition to the dominant political and academic climate of the early and mid-1980s, and, after a period of uncertain exploration, achieved a degree of academic legitimacy and popularity in the early 1990s. Of course this historical narrative may be unduly influenced by the archaeological tendency to interpret cultural developments through the ‘formative/pre-classic/classic/post-classic’ model. Nonetheless,

I suggest that queer theory and feminist archaeology shared somewhat parallel chronological developments.

Despite their parallel trajectories, queer theory and feminist archaeology were rarely in dialogue with each other. Queer theory, grounded in grass-roots political activist movements such as Queer Nation (Berlant and Freeman 1993), arose to meet the particular challenges of sexual politics during the neo-conservative 1980s, while feminist archaeology emerged primarily within academia as a critique of androcentric archaeological practices and interpretations. However, many of the archaeologists involved in the genesis of feminist archaeology were (and still are) themselves feminist activists, concerned not only with representations of gender in the past but also with the politics of gender and sexuality in the present (Hanen and Kelley 1992; Wylie 1991). What, then, were the intersections between the growing feminist theorization of sexuality in the 1980s and the emergence of feminist archaeology? To what extent has queer theory informed feminist archaeologies in recent years?²

To consider these questions, I reviewed bibliographies of feminist archaeological studies published throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Citational practices are one way in which scholars acknowledge their intellectual influences and position themselves within the larger field of academia, and thus bibliographies provide one imperfect measure of the extent to which particular schools of thought are being consulted and invoked by scholars in different subfields. My review focused primarily on nine edited volumes and proceedings which had been generated through conferences, conference symposia, and lecture series (Balme and Beck 1995; Claassen 1992a; Claassen and Joyce 1997; du Cros and Smith 1993; Gero and Conkey 1991; Miller 1988; Moore and Scott 1997; Walde and Willows 1991; Wright 1996). Because several of these volumes were limited to studies of prehistory, I also reviewed the 'gender' issue of *Historical Archaeology* (vol. 25 no. 4) and two monographs (Spector 1993; Wall 1994) to increase the representation of historical archaeology within the sample. Finally, I included Conkey and Spector's 1984 article as well as three recently published syntheses of feminist archaeology (Conkey and Gero 1997; Gilchrist 1999; Nelson 1997). Together these sources represent 220 papers, articles, or monographs by authors who identify their work as feminist and/or gender archaeology. Although such a sample is not meant to be exhaustive or even statistically representative (for example, few journal articles are included), it does include papers from a broad geographic and temporal distribution, spanning 1984 to 1999 and including authors from the United States, Australia, Canada, and Great Britain. In reviewing these works I noted citations belonging to three categories: first, early works about sexuality by feminist and gay and lesbian scholars dating to the 1970s and early 1980s; second, the literature surrounding the 'Sex Wars' of the mid-1980s; and, third, the emergent queer theory canon whose benchmarks include publications such as Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).³

Before beginning this exercise I expected to identify two trends: first, that feminist archaeologists have rarely, if at all, engaged with non-archaeological works on sexuality, and second, that it is only in the last few years that queer theory has entered feminist archaeological discourse at all. My suppositions were wrong on both counts. I found that 18 per cent of the 220 works reviewed cited one or more works that fall into one of the three categories described above. This percentage did not increase or decrease markedly

with time, but vacillated within a fairly stable range of 10 per cent to 35 per cent from year to year. This suggests that, while sexuality has not been a central topic of archaeological interpretation (Voss and Schmidt 2000), archaeologists have, over the last fifteen years, consistently considered sexuality to be one important aspect of gender-focused research.

Second, I found that the relationship between queer theory and feminist archaeology is, while uneven, by no means absent. Although almost none of the works I reviewed referenced publications generated during the 'Sex Wars' of the mid-1980s, 'queer theory' publications by Foucault (especially *History of Sexuality* [1978]), Butler (both *Gender Trouble* [1990] and *Bodies that Matter* [1993a]) and Grosz (*Sexual Subversions* [1989] and *Sexy Bodies* [1995, with Probyn]) were cited with regularity. Queer theory citations were especially common in introductions to edited volumes and conference proceedings and rare in archaeological case studies, suggesting that queer theory has been used predominantly to theorize the feminist archaeological project as a whole rather than to interpret archaeological evidence.

Finally, the papers and monographs that I reviewed relied overwhelmingly on one source, Ortner and Whitehead's *Sexual Meanings* (1981), which accounted for over 30 per cent of all noted citations about sexuality. An edited volume of anthropological case studies generated in the mid-1970s, most (but not all) contributed papers in *Sexual Meanings* are focused on band, tribe, or chiefdom societies (1981: x), interpret gender and sexuality through a focus on symbolic constructs and the sex/gender system model (1981: 1–9), and emphasize 'considerations of hierarchical power and differential prestige between men and women' (Gilchrist 1999: 8). The prominence of *Sexual Meanings* as a source about sexuality for feminist-inspired archaeological research has not diminished with time, but appears to be as strong in the late 1990s as it was in the first decade of feminist archaeological inquiry. The persistent citations of *Sexual Meanings* may indicate a degree of theoretical conservatism in feminist archaeology with regard to conceptions of sexuality and its relationship to gender. As Roberts has noted, 'The paradox is that those interested in an archaeology of gender cannot afford to challenge the framework assumptions and paradigms of research practice' (1993: 18). In other words, it is difficult for those feminist archaeologists who are occupied with legitimizing and developing gender studies simultaneously to embrace queer theories that deconstruct gender and sexuality. For example, Butler's position that 'biological sex' is a discursive regulatory practice (Butler 1993a: 1) could be seen to challenge archaeological studies of gender that use physical indices to assign a 'sex' to human skeletal remains. Deconstructions of sex and gender destabilize precisely those categories (e.g. male, female, woman, man) that are necessarily invoked to model engendered social worlds of the past.⁴ The fear of erasing or compromising 'gender' as a category of archaeological analysis may account for the apparent reluctance of many archaeological researchers consistently and critically to engage with queer theory.

At the same time, there are also aspects of queer theory that resist its wholesale importation into archaeology. The feminist theories of sexuality that emerged during the particular sexual politics of the 1980s and 1990s addressed the conditions of modern, Western, and predominantly urban sexual subcultures. Rubin particularly notes that the organization of gender and sexuality 'as two distinct arenas of social practice' (1984: 308) may be specific to Western industrial societies. The enduring appeal of the sex/gender

system model within feminist archaeology may be because it is sometimes a more appropriate, if imperfect, approach to considering sexuality and gender in pre-industrial and kinship-based cultures (Rubin 1975). Likewise, queer theorists tend to emphasize analyses of fictional texts, cinema, and other representations at the expense of historical or social science research (Rubin 1994: 93) – what historian Duggan has termed ‘the discipline problem’ (1995).⁵ Broken pots, faunal remains, collapsed structures, burials, soil residues, and other evidentiary sources in archaeology rarely resemble the literary works or films that often form the basis of queer theory analyses (e.g. Butler 1993a). It is not always immediately apparent how to apply reading methodologies developed for modern cultural texts to the archaeological record.

Because of the temporal and geographic specificity of queer theory, archaeologists have important contributions to make in developing theories of gender and sexuality that can be applied to material evidence and that are appropriate for analysis of non-‘Western’ and non-‘modern’ cultures. Archaeology faces the unique challenge of stretching theories of sexuality in new chronological and cultural directions and in probing the cultural and representational limits of distinctions between gender and sexuality. While neither feminist nor queer theories should be applied unquestioningly to the past, together they provide powerful tools that can broaden archaeological interpretations of past sexualities.

Acknowledgements

This material is based upon work supported under a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship. My thanks to Meg Conkey, Alison Wylie, Liz Perry, Rob Schmidt, El Casella, Masha Raskolnikov, Deb Cohler, and Amy Ramsay, whose insightful comments and support greatly improved this essay.

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Notes

- 1 These debates are perhaps best exemplified by two contradictory publications on lesbian sadomasochism, *Coming to Power* (SAMOIS 1982) and *Against Sadomasochism* (Linden et al. 1982), and by the controversies over the role of gay male bathhouses in safer sex campaigns and AIDS transmission (e.g. Bayer 1989: ch. 2; Berube 1996; Dangerous Bedfellows 1996). Excellent resources on this period include *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Vance 1984), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (Snitow et al. 1983), and *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (Duggan and Hunter 1995).
- 2 One could also, of course, ask the extent to which feminist archaeology affected the growing feminist theorizations of sexuality. However, my readings suggest that feminist scholars outside archaeology are not familiar with feminist archaeological projects, a point also noted by Conkey and Gero (1997: 424–5 – but see Rubin [2000] for a rare

exception). In part this is because it is only recently that feminist archaeological work is becoming visible to cross-disciplinary audiences through topical monographs (e.g. Gilchrist 1994; Spector 1993; Wall 1994) and the appearance of archaeological case studies and reviews in multi-disciplinary edited volumes and journals (e.g. Bahn 1992; Conkey and Tringham 1995; Conkey with Williams 1991; Gero 1988; Wright 2000).

- 3 Data and tabulations from this bibliographic review are on file with the author.
- 4 Note, however, that some feminist archaeologists (e.g. Joyce 1996, 2000) have found that models of gender performativity and other deconstructive approaches to gender actually enhance the archaeological 'visibility' of prehistoric gendered identities and practices.
- 5 With this in mind it is not surprising that one of the most prominent uses of queer theory in archaeology at present is found in the interpretation of archaeologically recovered representational imagery, as in the works of Joyce (1996, 2000), Meskell (1996, 1998, 2000), and Vasey (1998) on imagery of the body in prehistoric Mesoamerica, Egypt and Europe, respectively.

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