

What Knowers Know Well: Standpoint Theory and Gender Archaeology

Alison Wylie



Advocates of “gender archaeology” have explicitly rejected feminist, social constructionist influences on their field

Wylie argues that this stems from an instinct to preserve an aperspectival (“view from nowhere”) ideal of scientific objectivity

Instead, Wylie advocates reinterpreting virtues of objectivity in a way that acknowledges perspective but does not amount to “corrosive relativism”

The epistemic usefulness of social constructionist / standpoint theory analysis is an important theme for Wylie

Social Constructionism

Social constructionist claims call into question the inevitability / necessity / givenness of the scientific ideas or objects they target

Most important of these for Wylie will be the scientific ideal (“elevator word”), objectivity

Three strategies for constructionist analysis:

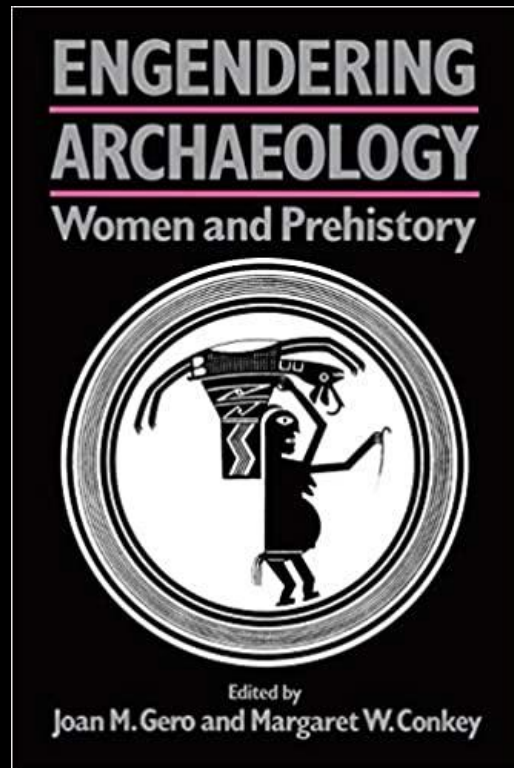
1. Historical/genealogical: contingency is documented in the formation and evolution of a particular idea, object, or regulative ideal
2. Comparative: cross-context analysis establishes that a way of being or representing ... that had been presumed invariant does, in fact, take different forms across contexts
3. Explanatory: the delineation of an infrastructure – sustaining mechanisms or scaffolding – establishes that what had presumed inevitable depends upon conditions that are themselves contingent.

History of the *aperspectival objective ideal*:

Until the late 19th century, science relied on the “refined interpretive skills of a scientific elite” who could grasp universal “underlying forms”

As scientific communities expanded and diversified, aided by industrial age technologies and social developments, the familiar ideal of scientific objectivity that repudiates individual bias emerged

The formation of “gender archaeology”



Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory (Gero and Conkey 1991):

“a collection of essays on topics ranging from the reanalysis of sexist as well as presentist interpretations of paleolithic and neolithic art to an exploration of the role of gendered divisions of labor in sustaining the Aztec tribute system and in Inca state formation...”

Watson, Patty Jo, and Mary C. Kennedy. “The Development of Horticulture in the Eastern Woodlands of North America: Women's Role.”

- Reanalysis of the domestication of various plants in Eastern North America in the archaic period
- Watson and Kennedy challenge prevailing theories that (1) the plants “self selected” or else (2) were domesticated by male shamans for ritual uses—both of which ignore the potential role of women in plant domestication.



“eclipsing” of women’s roles



Hastorf, Christine A. “Gender, Space, and Food in Prehistory.”

- Analysis of the impact of the rise of the Inca empire on gender roles in Sausa households
- Hastorf compared biological sex of skeletal remains to existing data about their diets, revealing that after the Inca arrived, male and female diets diverged sharply.
- Ethnohistorical records suggest the Inca enlisted Sausa men for vassal labor, feeding them a diet of maize.
- Hastorf theorizes a shift in gender roles, with women increasingly laboring in maize agriculture to support male social-political activities.
- Challenges assumptions about static, biologically-determined household gender roles.



1989: The 22nd annual Chacmool archaeology conference at the University of Calgary

Theme: The Archaeology of Gender



The Chacmool conference: gender archaeology on the rise, but dissociated from feminism

- “To the surprise of all involved, the call for papers drew more than twice as many submissions as had any previous Chacmool.”
- Attracted a burgeoning cohort of women in archaeology
- A content analysis of the conference reported “a striking lack of feminist content: just a fifth of the contributors used the terms ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism,’ and few made any reference to feminist literature, authors, influences or ideas.”
- “The topic of the conference clearly resonated with women, attracting them from Europe and Australia as well as from all across North America, but for the most part they disavowed any feminist construal of this interest.”

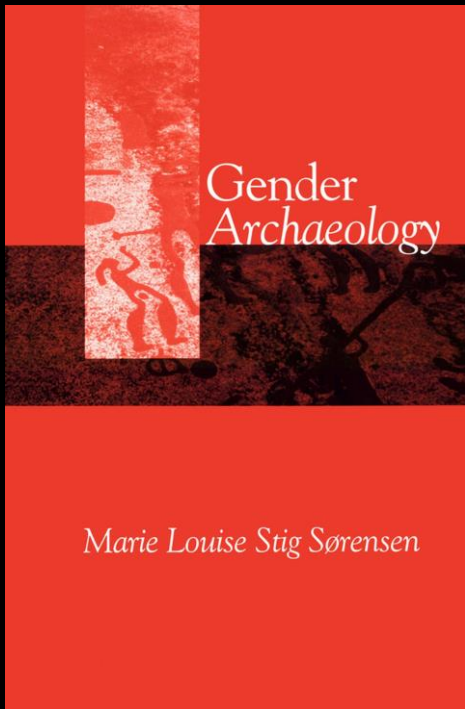
Marie Louise Stig Sørensen: *Gender Archaeology* (2000)



- Sørensen decries the (supposed) influence of feminism on gender archaeology
- Argues feminist influence is stultifying, reactionary, and responsible for the marginalization of gender studies within archaeology

Wylie interprets two lines of argument:

- 1) Feminist commitments are responsible for the essentialist conception of sex/gender that gender archaeology had relied on
- 2) Feminism is “just political,” epistemically biased
Feminist influence risks “reducing research to a matter of politics rather than cognition”
i.e. feminism in archaeology will lead to “wholesale relativism”



Wylie responds to (1) by noting that feminist scholars have been at the forefront of criticism of sex/gender essentialism; any presence of essentialist ideas in gender archaeology actually resulted from a *lack* of feminist influence

But Wylie's main focus is on argument (2).

Wylie says that argument (2) reflects deep-seated **positivist epistemic commitments** in archaeology:

“These presuppose a sharp distinction between social, contextual values and interests – contingent, non-cognitive considerations that should never intrude into the practice of science – and the ‘cognitive,’ epistemic values, like empirical adequacy and canons of scientific rationality, that should be the only factors that play a role in ‘contexts of justification.’”



Wylie connects these positivist commitments to the “aperspectival ideal” of the late 19th century.

At the time of the Chacmool conference, there was an ongoing “**theory war**” in archaeology:

- On one side were advocates of a “**processual**” methodology, which adhered to the old positivist commitments
- On the other side were “**post-processual**” theorists, who rejected the positivist commitments

Despite what Wylie sees as obvious affinities between the post-processual stance and the agenda of gender archaeology, the majority of Chacmool researchers disavowed any sympathy for post-processualism.

Gender archaeology was reformist with respect to assumptions about the naturalness of gender roles, etc.—but it was still committed to “archaeology-as-usual” methods of inquiry

Wylie's list of **ideals of objectivity**:

O1: ontological objectivity: the “really real” objects

O2: objective knowledge: claims that conform to the epistemic values we saw last week in Kuhn

O3: objective knowers: unbiased epistemic agents whose understanding approximates a “view from nowhere”

O4: collective knowers: communities whose epistemic procedures counteract individual biases

Wylie says that Sørensen's argument (2) presupposes that O3 is a proxy for O2:

i.e. The claims of “impartial” knowers can be trusted as objective knowledge

Conversely, claims made by seemingly partial observers cannot be “objective”

“...an assumption that the **only alternative to aperspectival conceptions of objectivity is capitulation to corrosive relativism**”

i.e. The claims of “impartial” knowers can be trusted as objective knowledge
Conversely, claims made by seemingly partial observers cannot be “objective”

Feminist **standpoint theory** challenges both of these assumptions.

Situated knowledge thesis: emphasizes the structural, rather than idiosyncratic, factors that affect epistemic agency; basically, there is no “view from nowhere”

Inversion thesis: those who are systematically marginalized may enjoy **epistemic advantages:**

Outsiders can often recognize assumptions taken for granted by the mainstream;

They may have access to different lines of evidence, explanatory resources

“A **standpoint** arises when those who are marginalized, and discounted on this basis, develop a critical standpoint on knowledge production, specifically, the knowledge making and ratifying practices of an authoritative research community or, more generally, a dominant culture.”

Wylie interprets the rise of gender archaeology as a “grass roots” recognition of androcentric, gender-essentialist assumptions in archaeology by a growing contingent of women in the field, i.e. the emergence of a **gender standpoint in archaeology**.

But gender archaeologists nevertheless adopted the mainstream antipathy for constructionism, feminism, standpoint theory.

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Conclusion: a provocation for gender archaeology

“I contend that specifying conditions for realizing O2 and O3/O4 requires social constructionist analysis; to adjudicate the credibility of knowledge claims and of epistemic communities we must take into account the epistemic effects of systematic social differentiation. ... Social constructionist analysis is, on this account, an indispensable set of tools for calibrating our confidence in the authority of a research community... Fleshing out this account of objectivity and instituting these practices of ongoing critical scrutiny is the most pressing epistemic challenge of our time, relevant to any field that is still bedazzled by the allure of a ‘view from nowhere.’”

Gems



Historical interaction of philosophy of science with scientific practice in archaeology



Challenge to the $O_2 \leftrightarrow O_3$ assumption



Sometimes convoluted narrative; excessive verbiage, academese