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Feminist Challenges To Archaeology: Avoiding An Epistemology Of The "Other"

Bill Maurer

Any explication of an "archaeology of gender" must begin with the question — why? What does archaeology have to offer the field of gender studies? Similarly, how and what could gender studies contribute to archaeology? As an ethnographer trained in feminist theory, I will answer the former question first, putting it in the context of that body of theory with which I am most familiar. I hope to arrive at the common-ground shared by gender studies and archaeology, to investigate the germinatives of that ground, and to ask several questions about the viability of those germinatives in the context of a feminist critique.

Starting from the premise that gender is a system of cultural codes inscribed on biological sex, gender studies in anthropology have worked toward an understanding of the unequal valorization of genders cross-culturally, and of social, political and economic stratification based on gender. In universalizing what gender *is*, however, scholars constitute gender as an immutable fact, an ahistorical, unchangeable reality which, once apprehended, can never be transcended. Gender, originally problematized as a cultural construct, becomes "naturalized." This teleological naturalization of what we have defined as a cultural construction results in a sort of academic fatalism — studies of gender invariably fall into studies of gender hierarchy and gender oppression, even where such oppression may not exist. As numerous feminist scholars have pointed out, one of the major problems with this formulation of gender is its ahistoricism, its amaterialism, its ethnocentrism and its overgeneralized universalism (e.g., Yanagisako and Collier 1987).

The resulting tendency to universalize the "nature" of gender hierarchy leads to two alternatives for critical theory building, each of which seems almost more polemical than anything else. One, that gender oppression *is* universal (Rosaldo 1974 is the classic example), leads to problems involving the historical

and cultural specificity of such oppression, and the *a priori*, perhaps ethnocentric assumption that such oppression exists. This standpoint further results in the creation of analytic dichotomies used to "explain" this oppression; dichotomies which are usually more culture-bound than the original assumptions regarding gender itself.

The alternative position is that gender oppression is *not* a universal fact of human existence. This position relies for much of its backing on the shortcomings of universalizing dichotomies. Here, however, problems arise involving ethnographer versus informant interpretation, and the oversimplification of the various dimensions of gender relationships. Infrequently is a middle road between these two positions explored.

To attack this question of universalism, some scholars have attempted to explore the *origins* of gender and the formation of hierarchies of individuals based on biological sex. Early formulations ranged from the psychological, in which processes involved in differentiation from the mother were seen as the root (Chodorow 1974), through the sociocultural, which focussed on the organization and symbolization of social life into assumed "public" and "domestic" spheres (Rosaldo 1974), to the political economic which examined the stratification of society through the development of increased complexity leading to state-formation and control of labor (e.g., Rubin 1975). Each of these has been expanded upon and revised. The psychological models aside, these formulations rest on, for the most part, extrapolation of present structures into the past and speculation about past forms. Very few scholars interested in the origins of gender support their hypotheses with empirical data since these data would ideally come from pre-state, hopefully pre-historic societies and can therefore only be explained archaeologically. Unfortunately, few of these scholars are equipped to deal with the concepts

of archaeological analysis. Archaeology thus should prove a useful ground for gender studies to explore.

Two further archaeological aides to gender studies relate less to the prehistoric context of archaeological research than to its physical subject matter. Gender studies have suffered from a lack of empirical and theoretical work on the spatial dimensions of gender. Several recent works, especially in geography, have addressed themselves to this particular problem. In a variety of contexts, feminist geographers have begun to examine the "space" of gender relationships (e.g., Momsen 1987). Yet, with few exceptions (Moore 1986; Ardener 1981), such an integration of spatial and gender data has yet to be realized in any serious way in anthropology. What little work exists for the most part focuses on a presumed public/private distinction. Archaeology, with its emphasis on spatial patterning and distribution, seems to have something to offer this void in gender studies.

Furthermore, except for a few political economic studies and highly specific cultural inventories (e.g., Cowan 1983), little work has been done on the material culture aspects of gender relationships. Many authors concern themselves with the material dimension of women's oppression, for example, yet few specifically analyze the actual physical "material" itself. Material culture, integral to archaeology, has been relatively neglected in gender studies. Material culture analyses (e.g., Rathje 1979) could contribute to a greater understanding of the material bases of gender construction and gender relationships.

Many of the archaeologists whose work I examine here engage at least one of the problems I have outlined above. Yet, as archaeologists, they also play on the other side of the fence and ask, albeit sometimes implicitly, what do gender studies hold for archaeology? As has been effectively argued (Conkey and Spector 1984), the main value of gender studies, and specifically *feminist* gender studies, for archaeology is its focus on people — the individuals and *agents* who actively construct their world. The feminist project is one which seeks dialectically to link individual experience to broader issues. Much of feminist thought is based upon and firmly grounded in the perceptions and life experiences of women and men as they relate to gender relationships. As the slogan goes, "the personal is

political"; the individual project cannot be separated from the systemic.

In contrast, a main criticism of traditional systems theory in archaeology has been its *neglect* of the role of the individual (Conkey and Spector 1984:22-23). Archaeological systems theory tends toward a rigid compartmentalization of cultural realities. We no longer have a holistic system, but economic, political, cultural, social, etc. *subsystems*, each of which is often seen in isolation from the others (see Conkey and Spector 1984:23). Feminist gender studies, in contrast, occur almost exclusively in the interstices of compartmentalized thought — they are by definition multidisciplinary. Gender studies can thus help tremendously in the archaeological effort to re-integrate the agents in prehistory, and to obtain a more holistic view of past cultures.

What has happened, then, in previous archaeological studies of gender and feminist studies of archaeology? To what extent has the potential of the interrelationships between gender studies and archaeology been realized? We are given little to work with.¹ Previous studies straddle many of the problems outlined above without specifically addressing them. These works can be divided roughly into two categories according to methodology and underlying assumptions: the task differentiation approach and the contextual approach.

The task-differentiation framework, as described by Conkey and Spector (1984:24-27; Spector 1983), is a four-stage method for compiling and analyzing data having social, temporal, spatial and material dimensions. Using available ethnographic and archaeological sources, the archaeologist "identifies the tasks performed in a given cultural setting" (Conkey and Spector 1984:25). These tasks are defined very broadly, from resource procurement, through facilities construction and household maintenance, and so on, to include all aspects of human existence involving material things. Next, again relying on ethnographic and/or ethnoarchaeological data, the archaeologist examines the social dimension of the tasks — who does what, who organizes whom, and in what fashion, etc. The temporal dimension of task differentiation attempts to identify the frequency, duration, time and schedule during which each task is performed. These are then put in spatial context, and finally, in material context. At the end, the archaeologist has produced an

exhaustive catalogue of tasks (e.g., Spector 1983), each cross-referenced according to its various dimensions.

This is more a model-building approach than an idiographic one, and its implications for model-building on the interrelationships between gender and material culture are great. The model-building quality of the task-differentiation framework is its strongest asset; in the hands of archaeologists like Conkey and Spector, it becomes a powerful analytic tool. On its own, however, task differentiation analysis does little to advance the archaeological analysis of gender. The exhaustive cataloguing process necessary to arrive at any conclusions is somewhat daunting, and reminiscent of a sort of Boasian call to particularize, and *only* particularize. Although Spector writes that "the archaeological application of the framework must await further research" (Spector 1983:93), one wonders exactly how *much* further research will be needed to bring task differentiation analyses into archaeological contexts. The overriding practical problem with the task differentiation approach for archaeology is its reliance on ethnoarchaeological data. What do we do when we have *no* such data? Further, how can we be sure, when using primary and secondary sources, of the accuracy of such data? Finally, how do we know when we have enough data to start making some hypotheses about the archaeology of gender?

The second approach to the archaeology of gender — the contextual approach — may help us work around this problem. It is best represented by several archaeologists working with the symbolic and structural archaeological formulations of Ian Hodder, as well as a few archaeologists involved in activity area analysis.² When applied to gender, the contextual approach seems to bring to light symbolic and structural relationships between material culture and gender, providing the possibility for extrapolation of these into postulates about gender relationships and hierarchy. Yet the contextual approach runs the risk of observer-bias, a risk which, for the purposes of feminist studies of gender, may seriously detract from the value of this type of analysis.

Flannery and Winter, for example, in their study of household activity areas, make an important assumption in analyzing Mesoamerican household goods — that areas and artifacts associated with food preparation and clothes production were

"female work areas," while flint chips, scrapers, and the like were associated with men (Flannery and Winter 1976:43). While this may have been exactly the case, Flannery and Winter's data do not, on their own, support this conclusion about the gender division of labor and the gender organization of household space. They instead base their assumption on ethnographic data. The validity of this data, not to mention the validity of the use of ethnographic data in this context, remains to be examined.

Price (1978), in his analysis of mesolithic tool kits in the Netherlands, draws similar conclusions without any such ethnographic data to fall back on:

Clearly only a very general distinction can be made in terms of the kinds of activities taking place at H2:I. Wood/bone working appears to be a major focus of activity in the south-east half of the site, . . . while more cutting activities are found to the northwest. These differences may be related to the locations of male and female activity. The presence of points and backed blades (hunting tools) and blade cores (tool manufacture) in Area E suggests that this area may be dominated by male-specific tasks. The scrapers, borers, and notched pieces . . . may be associated with female-specific tasks [Price 1978:19-20].

Like the early feminist scholarship which postulated a universal public/domestic division, these analyses rest largely on Western assumptions about the roles and activities of men and women. Although many contemporary examples may suggest predictable patterns of sex-specific material culture and activities, feminism asks us to challenge all such generalizations and calls into question our own biases about sex-specific behavior.

Other contextual analysts are much more careful about making such universalist assumptions. Liv Gibbs (1987) has identified different associations of material artifacts with differently sexed burials and hordes and has identified changes in these associations over time. On the basis of this, she has drawn conclusions about the statuses of women and men relative to each other and their changes in status over time. Marie Louise Stig Sorensen (1987) has similarly investigated the role of artifact associations in gender relationships. Each of these analyses of material remains seems valid, perhaps more so

because of the wealth of data available to both archaeologists.

Yet what are the underlying assumptions of this method of analysis? To what extent should we assume that objects buried with individuals were necessarily used by those individuals or symbolically associated with those particular individuals? This is a huge problem, and one beyond the scope of this paper to investigate fully. Yet, when we are dealing with gender relationships and material culture, it is not a question we can ignore. In the ethnographic record, at least, there seems to be no direct relationship between grave goods and gender status or gender division of labor, nor is there any clear relationship between grave goods and the status of particular individuals, male or female. There is a great diversity in what goes into the grave, if anything. The first question this diversity suggests is whether grave goods are necessarily conceptually linked to the individual being buried, or to some religious or cosmological notions of an afterlife? Were grave goods necessarily possessions of the dead individual, and do they represent aspects of the quotidian existence of the individual while alive? The answers to these questions would vary from culture to culture, representing a diversity not reflected in Gibbs's (1987) and Sorensen's (1987) analyses.

As the task-differentiation approach gets bogged down in questions of secondary-source accuracy, availability of ethnoarchaeological data, and the labors of cataloguing all the activities of a people, the contextual approach suffers from a tendency to rely uncritically on some of our own assumptions about what it is to be "female," "male," and in fact, "human." The answer to the question I posed before about the task-differentiation framework's reliance on ethnoarchaeological data — has been answered, albeit inadvertently, by the contextualists: we make it up out of our own experience. We create, as it were, an archaeological "other" imbued with characteristics defined by us and, thus, a part of us. We posit universal "male" and "female" attributes and activities and then "discover" them in our analyses.

Recent developments in ethnography have focused on just such observer-biased constructions. James Clifford, among others (Clifford 1986), has examined the constitution of the "ethnographic other," and how this other is reified in the eth-

nographic text. While moves toward understanding this "other" seem to have direct application to the archaeological problem outlined here, the critiques of Clifford point out the biases in *this* line of thinking. For example, the important new ethnographic text *Writing Culture*, though addressing itself to the problems of the "other" in ethnography, does not make any contributions to the problems of *women* being defined as "other" in our culture, and thus being made into the "other" of the ethnographic other (Mathieu 1988) in our ethnography (see Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989).

This very problem — first creating an other, be it ethnographic or archaeological, and then infusing that other with our own notions of the Western "other" — Woman — is the hurdle blocking any real strides toward an archaeology of gender. This hurdle can be overcome in ethnography for the simple reason that those whom we study are living, and can interact with our texts and our analyses. The interaction of informant with ethnographer holds the key to overcoming the essentially epistemological problem of defining "other." Yet in archaeology, we do not have the luxury of human interaction — our data are mute. Any models we develop, any hypotheses we put forth are ours and ours alone, full of personal and cultural biases.

How can we overcome this roadblock? I tentatively suggest that the internal relationships within the distorted Western opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, both in archaeology and ethnography, must be investigated to arrive at an archaeology that avoids an epistemology of the "other" (see Rowlands 1984:112-113; Keller 1985). This is the goal toward which a feminist archaeology, and indeed, *any* feminist inquiry, must work. In so doing, we open up an entire field for new research in archaeology as well as gender studies, research not only tied to the material aspects of gender, but to a self-reflexive anthropological critical practice, interested in the recognition of differently constituted subjects and individual notions of the self and selfhood.

NOTES

1. Although it does not form a major part of this argument, one should note that only three articles deal specifically with the institutionalized

androcentrism of archaeology (Gero 1983, 1985; Yellen 1983).

2. Those not associated with the work of Hodder include Myers 1978 and Zagarell 1986. The Hodderian approaches are represented by Gibbs 1987; Sorensen 1987; and Hodder 1983. Activity area studies include Flannery and Winter 1976; Hill 1970; Price 1978, all of which involve some mention of "sex-specific" activity areas; Kent 1984 provides an excellent summary and critique of some of this literature. See also Hodder 1982.

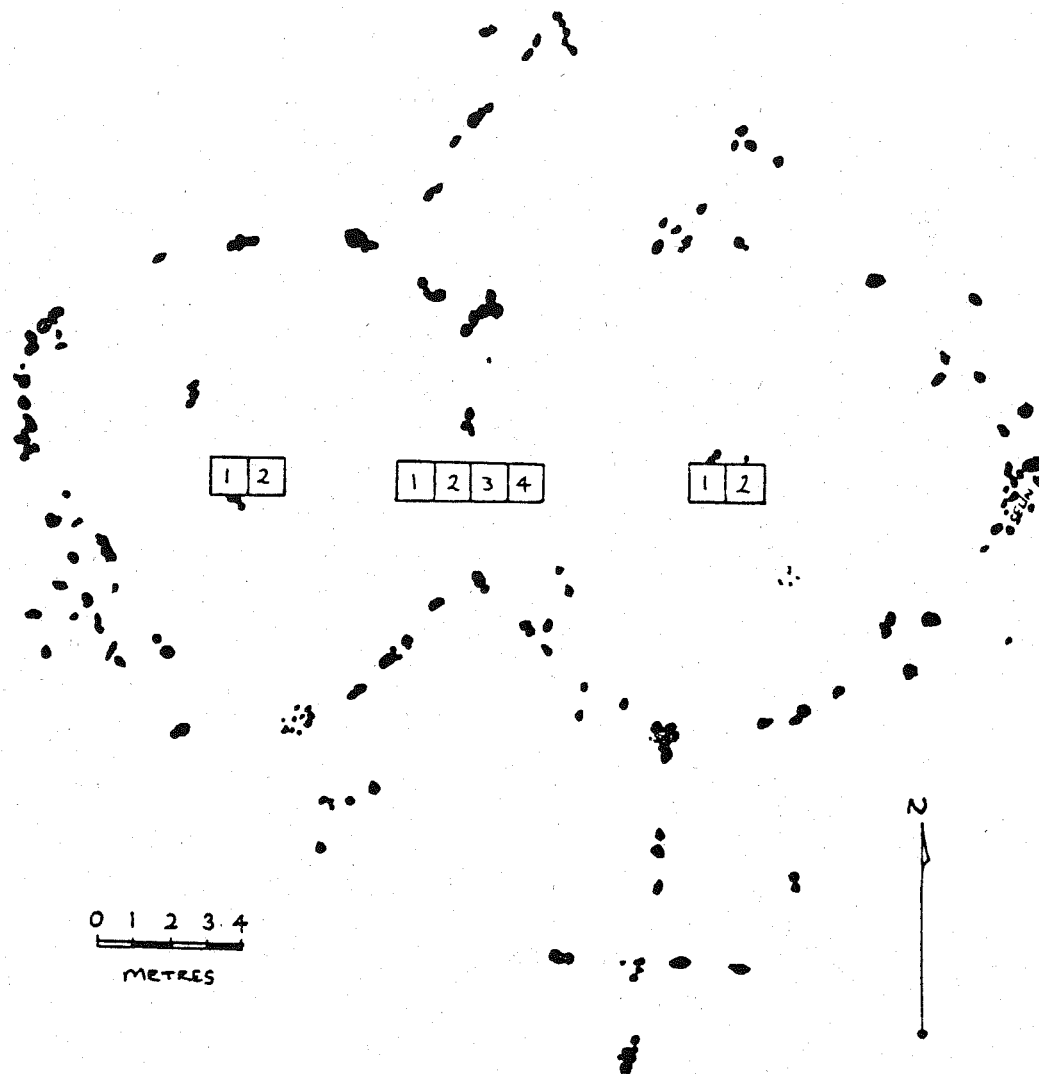
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The Archaeology of Gender



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Edited by Dale Walde and Noreen D. Willows



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLENARY SESSION

Introduction to the Plenary Session	
<i>Jane Kelley</i>	2
Gender: The View from Physical Anthropology	
<i>Adrienne Zihlman</i>	4
Gender Representation and Social Reality	
<i>Ian Hodder</i>	11
Feminist Critiques and Archaeological Challenges	
<i>Alison Wylie</i>	17
Does It Make a Difference? Feminist Thinking and Archaeologies of Gender	
<i>Margaret Conkey</i>	24

THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER

Recognizing the Emergence of Sex Differences in the Behaviour of Young Primates	
<i>Frieda Rickenbach</i>	35
Bones, Gender, and Life History	
<i>Mary Ellen Morbeck</i>	39
The Evidence for Sex Differences in the Hominid Fossil Record	
<i>Lori D. Hager</i>	46
Primate Reproductive Biology and Models of Human Origins	
<i>Linda F. Marchant</i>	50

Hominid Fertility Parameters During the Plio-Pleistocene <i>Noreen D. Willows</i>	55
Did the Australopithecines Have a Division of Labor? <i>Adrienne L Zihlman</i>	64
Prostitutes or Providers? Hunting, Tool Use, and Sex Roles in Earliest <i>Homo</i> <i>Sally McBrearty and Marc Moniz</i>	71

GENDER AS A CONSTRUCTION

Gender and the Construction of Reality <i>J. C. Smith</i>	84
Gender Divisions of Labor in the Construction of Archaeological Knowledge <i>Joan M. Gero</i>	96
The Construction of "Woman" in the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Girls' Puberty Ceremony in 1910 <i>Susan Moogk</i>	103
The Construction of Gender, Time and Space <i>Diane Lyons</i>	108

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO POST-PROCESSUAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Feminist Theory and Post-Processual Archaeology <i>Erica Engelstad</i>	116
The Construction of Gender Through Appearance <i>Marie Louise Stig Sorenson</i>	121
From Burials to Gender Roles: Problems and Potentials in Post-Processual Archaeology <i>Charlotte Damm</i>	130

ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO GENDER

One Man No Chop: Gender Roles in the Domestic Economy of Northern Ghana, West Africa <i>Joanna Casey</i>	137
Gender, Status, and the Focus of Material Display <i>Aubrey Cannon</i>	144

✓ Polygyny, Architecture and Meaning <i>Sabrina M. Chase</i>	150
--	-----

Sweatlodge Participation Among Nez Perce Women <i>Carol J. Carman</i>	159
---	-----

✓ Determining the Function of a "Men's House" <i>Mary Ann Larson</i>	165
--	-----

THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ARCHAEOLOGY: HISTORICAL AND EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVES

✓ An Historical Overview of Research on Women in Anthropology <i>Mary Ann Levine</i>	177
--	-----

✓ A Perspective on Women's Status in American Archaeology <i>Miriam Stark</i>	187
---	-----

Relationships Between Graduate Training and Placement in Canadian Archaeology <i>Jane Kelley and Warren Hill</i>	195
--	-----

✓ Women, Archaeology and the National Science Foundation: An Analysis of Fiscal Year 1989 Data <i>John E. Yellen</i>	201
--	-----

Towards a History of Women in Northeastern U.S. Archaeology <i>Susan J. Bender</i>	211
--	-----

Women Archaeologists in Asia and the Pacific <i>Sarah M. Nelson</i>	217
---	-----

✓ Dual Anthropology Career Couples: Different Strategies and Different Success Rates <i>Margaret C. Nelson and Deborah L. Crooks</i>	220
--	-----

Beyond Anatomy: The Sociology of Gender in Arizona Archaeology <i>Stephanie M. Whittlesey</i>	226
---	-----

GENDER IN HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Towards an Feminist Historical Archaeology of the Construction of Gender <i>Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood</i>	234
---	-----

A Preliminary Analysis of Gender Bias in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Spanish Colonial Documents of the American Southwest	
<i>Lee Fratt</i>	245

Access and Space, Symbolic and Material, In Historical Archaeology	
<i>Anne Yentsch</i>	252

The Genius of the Orangery: Women and Eighteenth Century Chesapeake Gardens	
<i>Carmen A. Weber</i>	263

Daughters and Sons-In-Law of King Cotton: Asymmetry in the Structure and Material Culture of Cahawba, an Antebellum Alabama Town	
<i>Linda Derry</i>	270

GENDER DIFFERENTIATION AMONG HUNTER-GATHERERS

Recognizing Gender in Plains Hunting Groups: Is It Possible or Even Necessary	
<i>Philip Duke</i>	280

Human Origins and the Sexual Division of Labour: An Archaeological Perspective	
<i>Pamela R. Willoughby</i>	284

Women in the Subarctic: Was Gathering a Viable Economic Activity?	
<i>Linda J. Reed</i>	292

Excavating Auel: The Gender Roles of Earth's Children	
<i>Janet S. Pollak</i>	297

GENDER ROLES IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD: IDEOLOGY, ART, AND MATERIAL REMAINS

The 'Goddess Temple' and the Status of Women at Niuheliang, China	
<i>Sarah M. Nelson</i>	302

Man and Language in Prehistory: Clues to Gender Conceptualization from Semantic Analysis	
<i>Eve Danziger</i>	309

The Representation of Women in Moche Iconography	
<i>Daniel Arsenault</i>	313

Ideology and Structure of Gender Spaces: The Case of the Kaggaba Indians	
<i>Augusto Oyuela-Caycedo</i>	327

Initial Study of the Structure of Women's Seclusion in the Archaeological Past	
<i>David B. Small</i>	336

The Myth of the Amazons	
<i>Haijo Westra</i>	343

Men Only? The Myths About European Paleolithic Artists	
<i>Pamela Russell</i>	346

The Consequences of Gender Bias in Mortuary Analysis: A Case Study	
<i>Wendy R. Eisner</i>	352

Gender and Archaeology: Mortuary Studies and the Search for the Origins of Gender Differentiation	
<i>Mary K. Whelan</i>	358

The Deposed Princess of Vix: The Need for an Engendered European Prehistory	
<i>Bettina Arnold</i>	366

The Captive Bride Syndrome: Iroquoian Behavior or Archaeological Myth?	
<i>Martha A. Latta</i>	375

GENDER ROLES AND THE ORIGINS OF AGRICULTURE

Gender Hierarchies and the Sexual Division of Labor in the Natufian Culture of the Southern Levant	
<i>Pamela J. Crabtree</i>	384

Women, Animal Rearing, and Social Status: The Case of the Formative Period Maya of Central America	
<i>Mary DeLand Pohl</i>	392

Changing Gender Roles at the Hunter-Gatherer Transition to Farming	
<i>Kathleen M. Bolen</i>	400

GENDER DIFFERENTIATION IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Life Patterns of Women in Medieval York	
<i>A. L. Grauer</i>	407

Feminist Challenges to Archaeology: Avoiding an Epistemology of the 'Other'	
<i>Bill Maurer</i>	414

Sexual Activities: Some Thoughts on the Sexual Division of Labor and Archaeological Interpretation	
<i>Karen Olsen Bruhns</i>	420
The Weavers Wraith	
<i>Alice B. Kehoe</i>	430
Women and Prehistoric Pottery Production	
<i>Prudence M. Rice</i>	436
A Preliminary Historical Outline of Northwestern High Plains Gender Systems	
<i>Marcel Kornfeld and Julie Francis</i>	444
Reflections of Sex Roles in the Archaeological Record: Insights from Hopi and Zuni Ethnographic Data	
<i>Julie C. Lowell</i>	452
Health Consequences of Divisions of Labor Among the Chumash Indians of Southern California	
<i>Sandra E. Hollimon</i>	462
Women and Gender in Maya Prehistory	
<i>Elizabeth Graham</i>	470
Women and Alcohol: Female Influence on Recreational Patterns in the West 1880 -1890	
<i>Susan Lawrence Cheney</i>	479
Gender in Complex Colonial Society: The Material Goods of Everyday Life in a Late Eighteenth Century Fur Trading Community	
<i>Elizabeth M. Scott</i>	419
Early Twentieth Century Gender Roles: Perceptions from the Farm	
<i>Linda France Stine</i>	496
Sisters of Sun and Spade, Women Archaeologists in the Southwest	
<i>Linda S. Cordell</i>	502
Gender and Colonization in Native Canadian Communities: Examining the Historical Record	
<i>Carol Devens</i>	510