

Gender Thinking in the Making: Feminist Epistemology and Gender Archaeology

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In this paper I suggest that gender archaeology has followed the three main feminist epistemologies as described by Sandra Harding (1986): feminist empiricism, standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism. I explore the main principles of these orientations and discuss their use in gender archaeology, offering examples from Norwegian, Spanish and North American contexts. My purpose is to trace a genealogy of gender archaeology from the point of view of epistemology that will reveal its feminist character. Even though it has been developed within the processual and post-processual contexts of archaeology, a review of its epistemological principles will show that gender archaeology must be situated within a wider feminist framework.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Spanish philosopher Amelia Valcárcel (1988), those political and social movements that have not been fully successful have difficulties in pinning down their foundational myths and their genealogy. She has coined the term *orthoversion* to describe the official discourse that all movements must have to empower their identity. The *orthoversion* could be defined as the unanimously recognized version describing a political movement. It consists of a group of important dates, crucial names and glorious events that order the movement's history. More than a genealogy, it is a self-portrayal that provides assurance to the group. Feminism is one of those movements and social theories that have had problems in designing its *orthoversion* in a clear and uncontested way. As Teresa del Valle (1995) remarked, it constantly suffers from *genealogical lapsus*: its origins, achievements, contributions are recurrently forgotten, holding back new advancements.

I suggest that gender archaeology suffers from the same problem. There is still some fog in the way that prevents us from clearly delineating its trajectory. There seems to be some confusion regarding the theoretical heritage from which it derives. For instance, some would argue that gender archaeology is the 'daughter' of post-processualism (see, for instance, Preucel 1995), but actually it was the daughter of the feminist movement and had its first steps within processualism. Similarly, some would reject the feminist theory as a fundamental source of analytic tools, and would claim that a non-feminist gender archaeology is a more appropriate version, more scientific and less biased (for instance, Moore 1997, Sørensen 2000, Díaz-Andreu 2005). I consider that these two claims have negative consequences: the first one blurs the origins by not situating them in the broader feminist tradition, and the second one refuses the main source of concepts and principles that give consistency to the attempt to study gender-related issues in

archaeology. Several authors have reflected on this reluctance to acknowledge feminism as a legitimate platform from which to study the past (Hays-Gilpin 2000, Engelstad 2007). My intention here is to follow the same path as the advocates of a feminist gender archaeology (Colomer i Solsona *et al.* 1992, Conkey & Gero 1997, Wylie 2006, 2007). I argue that it is unjustified to refuse a theoretical framework that has been – and still is – the very central structure of gender archaeology reasoning.

In this paper I aim to trace a genealogy of gender archaeology from the point of view of epistemology¹ in order to address several purposes. First, I want to show that the dualism gender archaeology/feminism is strongly rooted through epistemic principles. As we shall see, gender archaeology has followed step by step the three stages in feminist science as described by Sandra Harding (1986): feminist empiricism, standpoint theory and feminist postmodernism. To illustrate this point, I shall comment on some early developments in Norwegian gender archaeology, the research programme of maintenance activities developed in Spain and the use of hyper-text by some North American archaeologists. Certainly, Norwegian, Spanish and North American gender archaeologies have followed very different trajectories. For instance, in Spain there has been a special emphasis on combining feminist principles with historical materialism and structuralism. What I want to highlight is that in every context, beyond their differences, feminist scientific principles have been, and still are, followed recurrently. In fact, the multiple well-recognized contributions of gender archaeology to the discipline are undoubtedly feminist inspired: the introduction of gender as an analytical category, the inclusion of women's experiences and lives in the accounts of the past, the exposure and critique of androcentric biases and so on. In the multiple reviews of gender archaeology this is not sufficiently acknowledged.

As a consequence, after 30 years of gender archaeology development, our genealogy

does not always recognize feminist thinking as a fundamental pillar. Failing to acknowledge this fruitful link creates *genealogical lapsus* and holds back the advances of gender archaeology.

Second, as a consequence of reviewing the epistemic principles driving gender archaeology it seems clear that it emerged within processual contexts, developing that paradigm with original arguments, expanding its principles and showing the limitations of the normative processualism. Certainly, post-processualism provided more acceptance and recognition of gender archaeology but that relationship has not always been easy (Engelstad 1991).

To sum up, my aim is to shed some light on the principles that drive gender archaeology, and to provide a clear picture of how the unrecognized structure of gender archaeology has long been feminist scientific reasoning. My intention is to endorse an *orthoversion* of gender archaeology that considers feminist principles as its main theoretical source.

FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY: SOME ESSENTIALS

Epistemology may be broadly defined as the branch of philosophy that is concerned with such questions as what knowledge is, how knowledge is justified and how science actually operates to reach its aims. It might be considered as the skeleton that underlies the practice of science, the basic structure of any scientific reasoning; that is, how we know what we know. As such, every science – no matter how far from philosophy it might be – has to deal with epistemology at a certain stage, and archaeology is no exception.

The advocates of the New Archaeology were the first to make significant and explicit use of epistemological principles. They were fully familiar with Hempel's (1965) positivistic methodology or Kuhn's (1962) paradigmatic thinking – to name a few – and their intention to turn archaeology into a fully scientific discipline gave birth to thorough

reflections on the nature of archaeological reasoning and practice (e.g. Fritz & Plog 1970, Binford 1972, Levin 1973, see Wylie 2002). Archaeology and epistemology have been interwoven for several decades now and, in this trajectory, feminist principles had an important role as early as the 1980s (Conkey & Spector 1984, Dommasnes 1990, Wylie 1991a, Hanen & Kelley 1992).

Nevertheless, in recent reviews of epistemology in our discipline the contributions of feminist epistemology are usually not included. This is the case, for example, in Trigger's 1998 article in which he provides a broad review of the main epistemological orientations and how they shape archaeological inquiry. Trigger does mention the exposure of pernicious biases that approaches such as feminist or postcolonialist thought have brought to the discipline but his analysis does not go further. Similarly, the more recent book by Andrew Jones (2002), in which the author discusses the main debates around objectivity, subjectivity, rationalism and relativism, also ignores the feminist contributions to these topics. Although he draws on some important concepts from Harding, Haraway, Wylie and Longino, he manages to skip their feminist viewpoints. Beyond the efforts made by feminist archaeology practitioners to emphasize their contributions (see the 2007 volume of the *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* dedicated to doing archaeology as a feminist), only the advocates and practitioners of critical approaches in archaeology give due credit to feminist epistemic principles and acknowledge feminist archaeology as a fruitful critical tendency (e.g. Fernández Martínez 2006, McGuire 2008).

As we shall see, feminist epistemologies have developed new strategies of doing science. In accordance with post-structuralist critiques, they have formulated new visions regarding objectivity, accountability, justification of knowledge, the dichotomy subject/object in scientific research and so on. In what follows, I shall briefly elucidate some of

the general characteristics of feminist epistemologies that in my opinion have guided the practice of gender archaeology. In the next sections, I go into more detail, making use of Sandra Harding's threefold categorization.

First of all, feminist epistemologies have to be seen as 'successor science' projects, an expression used by Harding (1986:142) to indicate that 'they aim to reconstruct the original goals of modern science'. Even though they seriously erode the traditional conception of scientific knowledge and foster the suitability of specific non-epistemic values, they do not abandon the purpose of knowing reality. They want to reconfigure the way we give credit to new knowledge, not to delegitimize science. In other words, they do not agree with a narrow vision of objectivism but neither do they foster extreme relativism (Wylie 2002).

Feminist epistemologies claim a more realistic vision of what science is. For them, it is a complex multidimensional practice taking place within the social world; it is not an individual quest. In feminist accounts, communities are the agents of knowledge. Objectivity, standards and procedures are negotiated and established by the scientific community that, at the same time, is shaped by the social forces in which it is immersed. As a result, the view of science as a neutral, universal and autonomous means to produce knowledge is seriously challenged. You need more than just rules of logic and observation to grasp how science actually works (Tanesini 1999, González García 2005).

The defense of the importance of gender issues in science is argued from the more general statement that values have a role in science, regardless of whether they are consciously or unconsciously held (González García 2005). Traditionally, within positivism as described by Hempel (1965) and Nagel (1961), only the context of justification, where confirmation of scientific hypotheses is carried out, counts as science. Only that part is governed by a set of rules called method and only that should be a matter of concern

for epistemologists. The context of discovery, that is, the factors that affect the formulation of hypotheses, is not part of science but a creative activity without method. From a feminist perspective, even if the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification is still accepted, it is also recognized that they are more intertwined than traditional epistemologies used to claim. The former contains non-epistemic values that permeate the latter (Tanesini 1999). This is not to say that science is a mere vehicle to transmit subjective values, but just that we have to stop denying their presence and reconsider scientific procedures in light of this. 'Because we use knowledge produced by the sciences everyday to determine our commercial, military, health, educational, and other social arrangements and to justify our gender arrangements in these areas, feminists have been concerned to understand the sciences as they are practiced, not as . . . philosophers have traditionally constructed them' (Potter 2006:6). Feminists are concerned with gender inequality in all aspects of societies and consider science as one of the main culprits in the justification of such inequality. This is the reason why they attempt to reform the way we produce knowledge.²

Similarly, the objectives of science are not considered to be 'the pursuit of truth' but the resolution of specific problems. What is considered a problem, what kind of problems we must solve, which questions need to be answered, which kind of tools we have and what is accepted as a useful answer are the real guidelines of science (González García 2005). In accordance with this, feminist theories and epistemologies have a critical dimension: their ultimate aim is to know reality in order to transform it, to eliminate or dismantle gender inequality.

THE BEGINNINGS: FEMINIST EMPIRICISM

When Sandra Harding (1986) first explored and classified the ways feminists do science,

she started by asking how a politicized programme of research can be more scientific than allegedly value-neutral work. The first answer to this 'how' is, in fact, feminist empiricism.

Feminist empiricists would agree with and accept most of the existing scientific methodological norms present in traditional empiricism, be that logical positivism or the hypothetical-deductive method as described by Hempel (1965) and Nagel (1961). Despite what proponents of these orientations might believe, feminists would argue that quite often these methods do not prevent science from containing pernicious androcentric and sexist biases. Even if scientists claimed to be following a method that guarantees the exclusion of any subjective values, they were in fact producing androcentrically biased results. The only explanation for that, according to feminist empiricists, was an inadequate use of the method. The quality of science would improve simply by adhering better to the rules of traditional scientific reasoning that would effectively purge the scientific process of unintended androcentrism (Harding 1986). They would claim that only 'bad science' contains androcentric values, whereas 'good science' is free of such erroneous influences.

In Harding's account, this stage of feminist epistemology has a transitional character that paves the way to the next level, namely, standpoint theory (Harding 1986:162). It is transitional because it encompasses a contradiction in terms: it claims the advantages of political values (feminist interests had revealed the sexist bias) at the same time as it supports a methodology that requires neutrality. It challenges the division between context of discovery and context of justification, so central for normative positivism. And it demonstrates that the values endorsed in the context of discovery are crucial to understanding the scientific results. In other words, it shakes the pillars of the positivist paradigm.

However, Harding's critiques apply only to the traditional orientations of positivism. Empiricists have designed more sophisticated

versions of their theories in which values are accepted as having an important role in scientific reasoning (Tanesini 1999). Having this in mind, feminist empiricism is not a contradiction in terms; it is just one of the improved versions of empiricism that continues to offer inspiring results today. So far, there are two main feminist empiricist orientations: contextual empiricism as developed by Helen Longino (1990) and naturalized empiricism as developed by Lynn Nelson (1990). Although the two orientations differ in many details, they share common critiques of traditional empiricism. Tanesini (1999) has examined their similarities. First, they both consider science to be a social enterprise, pursued by groups of human beings. Therefore, any theory of knowledge must account for this social feature and not be limited to the justification of arguments. They reject the traditional view of science as an individual quest. Second, as science has a strong social dimension, epistemologists must open their horizons and include as a matter of concern the context of discovery as much as the context of justification. Third, both authors acknowledge that values play an important part in the justification of theories and in what counts as evidence. They also make use of two theses from the empiricist Quine (1990): namely, that observation is not independent from theory (you need certain concepts to make sense of observations) and that theory is underdetermined by empirical data (usually more than one theory applies to the same group of data). Hence, even though experience persists as the main source to test theories, it is not the only means of evaluation.

Their approaches differ mainly in the role that values have. For Longino (1990), values are part of the background assumptions needed to give sense to experience. Ideally, we should eliminate such values, but in reality, it is not possible. Instead, we can minimize their influence by turning the scientific community into a more democratic arena, where researchers with different backgrounds and interests will have equal access to evaluate

and criticize the work of others. In Longino's account, feminist values – as any other political or moral value – remain out of the methodology. On the contrary, Nelson (1990) considers that values are unavoidably part of the methodology, and therefore they should be subjected to empirical control. Those values that have a positive place in science must remain. As Potter (2006) has noticed and as we shall see, the boundary between Nelson's (1990) naturalized empiricism and standpoint theories is sometimes permeable.

THE ORIGINS OF GENDER ARCHAEOLOGY

The first Norwegian, British and American archaeologists who began to study gender did so by drawing on some positivist principles (such as the firm belief in objectivity) within processual contexts. Processualism – the empiricist tendency in archaeology – brought a profound renewal of the discipline in theory and in practice. Its original eagerness to make archaeology a discipline about people and not the archaeological record as their ultimate goal opened new possibilities (although soon after they narrowed their view and limited archaeology to the explanation of the archaeological record (Binford 1983)). Even though there were multiple developments, the most popular model adopted was from ecosystems theory, with a clear evolutionary inspiration. The new model conceived of human groups as operating within multiple systems and sub-systems tending towards equilibrium. But, in defining the sub-systems, it was argued that these must represent only large-scale variables. This paradigm ruled out the question of gender, arguing that such a variable is not accessible given the empirical archaeological data (Wylie 1991b). Past societies were explored as a unity, not divided into groups or factions. As Wylie (1991b) pointed out, Binford even wrote that to engage in micro-variables such as gender was not only irresponsible but also an attempt to moralize (Binford 1986 quoted in Wylie 1991b).

Inspired by the emergence of feminist theory and the feminist social movement, and despite a somewhat hostile climate, some archaeologists became aware that androcentrism was a pervasive feature in archaeology (Conkey & Spector 1984), which at the time was an unrecognized masculine narrative. Some of the early gender archaeologists sought to fix this deviation. They relied on the very same positivist methodologies as their colleagues but addressed research questions that had been ignored by mainstream approaches. In other words, they drew attention to the context of discovery, revealing how values within it affected the results of archaeological interpretations. They also drew attention to the range of data that had been ignored or rendered invisible, often by preconceived cultural values. The first 'feminist empiricist archaeologists' – as we may call them – were closer to Longino's version of empiricism. They limited the feminist influence to the context of discovery, the part of the scientific process that needed a thorough revision, while keeping the methodological rules free of such values.

To illustrate these points we shall look briefly at some of the first developments in Norway, the cradle of one of the most fruitful schools of gender archaeology. In Norway, as in other contexts, the first attempts were aimed at counteracting the tendency to value only masculine attitudes and to define societies in terms of exclusively modern masculine values. 'Finding women' was the first step to correct the deviations of the discipline. In mainstream archaeology this was seen as an unfruitful quest, due to the perceived lack of empirical sources. Besides, there was the problem of attribution, i.e. the difficulties in attributing the use or ownership of certain objects to a specific gender. As Dommasnes (1992:6) puts it, comments such as 'you may find enough for a short article' were not uncommon. However, these first attempts demonstrated that the lack of evidence and the problem of attribution were in fact weak assumptions unconsciously based

on androcentric principles, rather than statements based on observation (Dommasnes 1992); here was a 'bad practice' to be corrected.

In Norway, the problem of sources was addressed by looking at burial contexts, where individuals and objects could be linked with some certainty and women were undoubtedly present. In 1976 Liv Helga Dommasnes published the first thesis in gender archaeology ever written in Scandinavia. In it, she examined the sexual division of tasks and ranks present in the Late Iron Age (600–1050 AD) in Norway. She rigorously followed the methods and theories of the processualist paradigm: the assumption that grave goods reflected a person's role and activities in real life and Binford's theory of grave customs in pre-industrial societies (Dommasnes 1992). Her thesis provided an evaluation of the differences in the tasks performed by women and men. In 1976, archaeologists had not even thought that such an evaluation was possible or even worthy.³ Dommasnes found that women appeared to be related to textile production and harvesting, whereas men appeared to perform a larger number of tasks. She also found evidence of women performing what seemed to be male activities, which Dommasnes related to the wealth of women settled in richer farm areas where it was possible to take over male roles (Dommasnes 1976).

Harding (1986) considers feminist empiricism to have a very valuable advantage: it allows dialogue with non-feminist approaches; it bridges the gap and gives feminists an undeniable opportunity to be taken into consideration. Processualism, despite its limitations, allowed the pursuit of any initiative provided that it followed the hypothetic-deductive scientific method. As Liv Helga Dommasnes puts it,

Archaeology remained on the whole untouched, embedded in the positivistic ideal of scientific knowledge. In view of women's prehistory, this is perhaps not a matter of regret. Without the

optimistic belief that 'true knowledge' was possible, I doubt we could have tried such a suspect endeavor at the time. (Dommasnes 1992:3)

As I mentioned above, in making reference to Nelson's and Longino's sophisticated empiricist accounts, feminist archaeologists have improved positivist models of processual archaeology as well. Elisabeth Brumfiel is a good example in this respect. She carried out important critiques of the ecosystem paradigm that reigned in processual archaeology and suggested new ways to understand the object of archaeological inquiry. According to her, the ecosystem paradigm failed to acknowledge social change, especially because of its emphasis on 'whole populations and whole behavioral systems as the unit of analysis' (Brumfiel 1992:551). By ignoring social groups within communities and relying exclusively on natural selection as the mechanism for systemic change, the ecosystem paradigm contained unintended biases that had to be purged. As Brumfiel argues:

When archaeologists fail to assign specific activities to these groups [defined by gender, class or affiliation], dominant groups in contemporary society are free to depict them in any way they please. Most often, dominant groups will overstate the historical importance of their own group and undervalue the contributions of others, legitimating current inequalities. (Brumfiel 1992:553)

She also reflects on the common assumptions about ignored social actors that permeate the discipline as a consequence of the lack of serious study. As a feminist empiricist, she considers the aim of archaeology in a broader sense than simply interpreting data. She draws attention to the context of discovery, that is, the values and assumptions that drive our formulation of hypotheses. As she claims:

As archaeologists, we have a professional responsibility to present our prehistories in ways that make distorted appropriations of the past as difficult as possible, and, as scientists, we need to

work with models that expose our implicit assumptions concerning human roles and capabilities to critical reflection and hypothesis testing. (Brumfiel 1992:553)

Also, she fosters objectivity and believes in an empirically improved science when she claims that registering tasks performed by men and women will prevent wrong assumptions from arising and will stimulate research in those archaeological data that are not properly studied because they are not masculine related. Instead of relying exclusively on adaptation to explain changes in social systems, she proposes that we should understand change also as a result of social negotiation. In any given group, the access to labour and resources is defined through social negotiation between groups with different interests. These groups are defined in terms of gender, class and affiliation. To understand how and why a system changes we need to address the tensions and realignments of the different social groups, giving place to a new order and a reallocation of resources and labour. In two different papers, Brumfiel has explored the changes produced in post-classic central Mexico as a consequence of Aztec dominance (Brumfiel 1991, 1996). For instance, she observes, through patterns of the density and distribution of spindle whorls, pots and griddles, that the tribute system imposed by the Aztec state relied heavily on women's labour, causing realignments of household work (Brumfiel 1991). She shows how a new situation requires readjustment and creates new tensions between specific social groups.

Alison Wylie has written widely about the accuracy of feminist archaeology and how its practitioners in fact demonstrate great skill in using the scientific method. They combine empirical accuracy – what Wylie (1994, 2002) calls evidential constraints – with the use of certain non-epistemic values (namely, feminist ones), something poorly understood by defenders of objectivism or of relativism. Most of the examples that Wylie uses to illustrate her point come from recognized

processual gender archaeologists. However, I suggest that it would be more accurate to acknowledge them as feminist empiricist for the specific features not shared with processualists (i.e. the uses of non-epistemic values to enhance research).

STANDPOINT THEORIES

Although the first attempts to improve the scientific process were fruitful in documenting and removing androcentric biases, a better adherence to scientific rules did not seem to be enough, and the question still remained of how and why these incorrect presumptions were present in science in the first place. The next step⁴ brought the question a little bit further, as Wylie puts it:

But is it just a matter of human error – a failure to apply the tools of science carefully or widely enough – or are the tools themselves part of the problem, either in generating some of the biases that feminists document or, more modestly, in allowing bias to be reproduced, failing to be as thoroughly and automatically self-cleaning as we might have hoped? (Wylie 1997:49)

The feminist empiricists thus cast doubt on the very core of science, leading to analyses that question not only bad practices, but also scientific procedures and the very idea of objectivity. One of the main arguments that led to this approach was the realization that biases were not simply mistakes committed by individuals. As Wylie (2006:31) has noticed, biases were prejudices, received beliefs unreflectively shared by the scientific community as a whole that supported and justified a hierarchical social order. This fact has been recognized in the large number of postmodern critiques of science that insist on the social and political factors affecting the work of scientists (for a recent review, see Fernández 2006). From feminist stances, there have been different theories that suggest new ways to deal with this issue. For instance, one of the most popular is Donna Haraway's concept-situated knowledge, which challenges

the traditional idea of objectivity and suggests the need to *locate* the production of knowledge instead of pretending to see reality from nowhere (Haraway 1991:189). Some archaeologists have made use of her theories (e.g. Skogstrand 2005, Tomášková 2007), others have adopted her vision to understand the reluctance of some gender archaeology practitioners to engage with feminist principles (Engelstad 2007). In this paper I would like to turn to a similar feminist approach, namely *standpoint theory*.

Standpoint theories have been developed since the 1980s by various authors including Nancy Hartsock (1983), Hilary Rose (1983), Dorothy Smith (1988), Sandra Harding (1986), Patricia Hill Collins (1991) and Alison Wylie (2003) among others. Although their accounts differ in more than mere details, they all share some common ground. The main tenet of standpoint theories states that certain social groups have epistemic privilege because of the marginalized social location they inhabit. This location provides them with a less distorted view about how reality actually is. People in privileged situations tend to be uncritical and somehow less objective. They enjoy the advantages of the social and political system and therefore tend to be blind about its shortcomings. As Terry Eagleton has recently explained it:

This [to be objective] is especially difficult for those who wield power – for power tends to breed fantasy, reducing the self to a state of querulous narcissism. For all its tough-minded pragmatism, it is riddled with delusion, assuming that the whole world centres subserviently upon itself. It dissolves reality to a mirror of its own desires. It is those whose material existence is pretty solid who tend to assume that the world is not. Power is naturally solipsistic, incapable of getting outside its own skin. (Eagleton 2003:122)

In contrast, people placed in subjugated positions are motivated to understand the reasons of their own oppression, which leads them to a deep understanding of reality that reveals its contradictions, problems and tensions. These

arguments, central to standpoint theory, were originally derived from Marxist ideas about the privileged epistemic position of the proletariat and Hegel's dialectic of the slave and the master. In Marxist accounts the proletariat is in a better position to analyse the social reality because they are a crucial part of the system but do not have an interest in its continuation. Similarly, in Hegel's account the slave is more able to see the character of the relationship that links her/him to the master (see Harding 1986). Feminist standpoint theorists adopted these ideas: women are the subjugated group within patriarchal societies. They are part of the system as they carry out the work that allows its reproduction. However, they do not have an interest in its continuation and that is why they have a better stance from which to analyse social reality. As Collins (1991) has formulated it, women are *outsiders within* which means being part of the system but inhabiting its margins. They are more able to see how gender structures shape societies hierarchically, whereas men tend to be blind about it.

To fully understand these arguments some concepts must be clarified. In standpoint theories 'social locations' have an important role. A social location is structurally defined as the place an individual inhabits at the crossroads of different axes of differentiation, such as gender, class, race, sexuality and so on. In most societies, these axes are hierarchal, so there are privileged and marginalized locations. People in a marginalized social location may or may not develop a 'standpoint'. As Potter puts it, 'a standpoint arises when people occupying a subordinate social location engage in political struggle to change the conditions of their lives and so engage in an analysis of these conditions in order to change them' (2006:131–132). In other words, a standpoint is not an individual opinion but an account of social reality made by a group of people aware of their inferior position in the social order and who are willing to change

it. We could say that the standpoint of women is feminist theory.

Feminist standpoint theory would enjoy a certain epistemic privilege because it is based on the social analysis made by women occupying an inferior position and aware of the limiting conditions that gender structures impose on women. The first formulations of standpoint theory, more attached to the positivist traces of Marxism, considered women as a homogeneous group, sharing all kind of experiences and oppressions and, as a result, developing only one standpoint that would give a complete interpretation of reality (Tanesini 1999). However, later formulations have exposed the problems that derive from such view, namely, the essentialization of women and the invisibility of differences between them. As a response, the standpoint theory developed by authors like Harding (1991, 2008) takes into consideration the diversity among women and how their subordination can be more complicated when sexuality, race or ethnicity come into play. Harding suggests that research must be rooted in *marginal lives* 'to explain not only those lives but the rest of the micro or macro social order' (Harding 2002:347).

Even though standpoint theorists accept multivocality, they do not relinquish their aspiration to objectivity; in fact, they have reinforced the concept of objectivity. Harding (1986, 1991) coined the term *strong objectivity* – another key concept in standpoint theory – as one of the new aims scientists must pursue. According to her, traditional scientific method failed in screening out values and prejudices of dominant groups, failing to recognize the influence of ideologies such as androcentrism. This is because traditional scientific standards do not examine the principles that drive the context of discovery. Harding proposes to reinforce objectivity: even if every perspective is situated in specific socio-political contexts, not all of them are equally valid. Some of

them produce better knowledge than others. Developing a strong objectivity means to assess scientifically the context of discovery to observe the relationships between specific social locations and the objective knowledge they produce (Harding 1991). On this basis, standpoint theory does not claim automatic epistemic privilege (Wylie 2003); it does not imply that anyone belonging to a minority will automatically produce better knowledge. Instead, it states that belonging to an inferior social location *tends to* provide you with a privileged understanding of reality, but in the final analysis the quality of your standpoint and the result of practising a strong objectivity will determine if the knowledge is valid or not. In tune with Harding, Alison Wylie's formulation of standpoint theory also offers a way to reinforce objectivity. In this case, Wylie (1994) draws attention to empirical data and claims that, even if standpoints base their principles in political values, they must test their arguments against empirical data.

MAINTENANCE ACTIVITIES: STANDPOINT THEORY IN ACTION

In contrast to empiricists, for standpoint theorists social inequality is the basis of any scientific research. Beginning with marginal lives is the basis of gaining less distorted or fewer false results. What standpoint theory pursues can be formulated in two questions: what can we learn of the dominant paradigm by starting from marginal lives? And 'how [are] the natural and social orders . . . organized such that the everyday lives of women and men . . . end up in the forms they do?' (Harding 2002:347). This is exactly what the research programme of 'maintenance activities' developed in Spanish archaeology seeks.

The concept of *maintenance activities* was developed in the late 1990s by a group of Catalan archaeologists and it now represents one of the main agendas in Spanish gender archaeology (Bardavio & González Marcén

1996, Picazo 1997, González Marcén *et al.* 2006, Montón Subías & Sánchez Romero 2008, Montón Subías 2009).⁵ These activities are described as a series of tasks related to the sustenance, well-being and reproduction of all members in a group (Picazo 1997, Montón Subías 2000, González Marcén *et al.* 2006). The activities and how they are organized are culturally specific but normally they comprise all kinds of caring activities, including harvesting, processing and cooking of food, textile manufacture, health and hygiene tasks, socialization of children and the maintenance of common spaces (Fig. 1). The main objective of these activities is to guarantee the group's survival, ensuring the stability of the whole group through daily routines. They require specific technological knowledge and social skills to weave social relationships (Masvidal *et al.* 2000, González Marcén *et al.* 2008). Archaeologists pursuing this new agenda believe that it overcomes certain drawbacks present in household archaeology, especially the fact that the activities are not limited to the domestic space, but can be performed in many different places (Montón Subías 2000). Unlike the concept of the household in which the space defines the tasks, maintenance activities define the

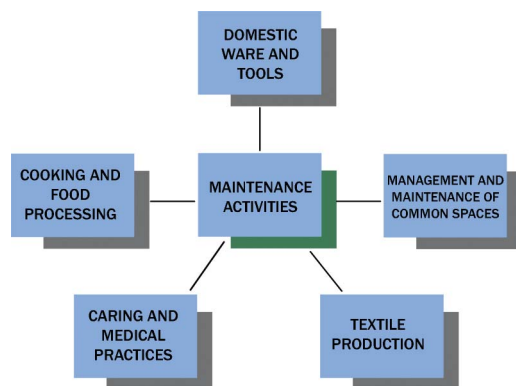


Fig. 1. Groups of common maintenance activities (after González Marcén *et al.* 2007). Reprinted by permission from Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

spaces that can be a household, open areas or even specialized buildings (Montón Subías 2000). All members of the community enjoy the outcomes of maintenance activities, but it is usually only women who are responsible for their performance.

This last statement has sometimes been dismissed as speculative (it is hard to know in every single case if women alone were responsible for these activities), essentialist and stereotypical (it reinforces the connection of women with domestic activities instead of giving them a role in different and wider social or political areas). These authors have recently answered these critiques (González Marcén *et al.* 2008). First, they argue that most likely in the origins of humankind these tasks were performed by all members of a group, but progressively ended up being the sole responsibility of women in most traditional and historical societies (Montón Subías 2007). Moreover, recent insights into the archaeology of identity have suggested that there are structural reasons – neither biological nor essentialist – that show high consistency between maintenance activities and the relational identity developed by most women (Hernando 2000, 2002, 2006). Second, they do not imply that women were absent from other social or political domains. Furthermore, as practitioners of standpoint theory they seek to explain other aspects of the social and political order by starting from women's experiences. Even if the attribution of these activities to women is not always possible, I would argue that this is not an obstacle to still considering the study of 'maintenance activities' as part of the feminist agenda in archaeology. No matter who actually performed those tasks, they are part of the work women have been performing for centuries and still do today. Despite the common ideology that systematically hides the importance of these activities, not even recognizing them as 'work', we know that they are crucial in guaranteeing the survival of any social group, and for this reason they deserve to be properly studied in the past.

Although the archaeological record normally offers abundant data related to these activities, they have not been fully studied. As many authors have noticed (Brumfiel 1992, Conkey and Spector 1984), those tasks that are thought to be feminine have not received so much attention. Hernando (2006) has recently gone further to explain that the systematic omission of these activities in history and archaeology are due to the internal logic of these disciplines. They are structured as a succession of changes that show our increasing material control of the world; consequently only those activities and areas of social life that play the lead in such changes and the people who perform them are taken into consideration. Neither recurring and non-specialized activities nor maintenance activities are considered by normative discourses.

Following archaeologists such as Brumfiel (1991) and Hastorf (1991), who showed the importance of these activities in times of political change in Mesoamerican and South American contexts respectively, the authors who foster the study of maintenance activities insist on linking them with the broader social arena:

Instead of considering them as similar and monotonous, as a constant rather than a variable, we wanted to connect them with the social, economic, political and ideological transformations that confer dynamism and creativity to societies over time. And, in fact, most of the contributions to the seminars made clear that the rhythm and consequences of economic and social transformation could not be fully understood unless we take into account the crucial role played by changes affecting the everyday forms of maintenance activities. (González Marcén *et al.* 2008:4).

To date, the research conducted under this new agenda has been very fruitful; some examples will suffice to show its potential. Masvidal *et al.* (2000) find strong connections between the changes seen in activities related to weaving, spinning and storing grain and the emergence of social complexity in the

Northeast Iberian Peninsula during the Iron Age. They observe an intensification of textile and food production that the authors relate to the emergence of elites taking over part of the production to set up new social hierarchies. The control of production would have generated an increase in the workload of women and the realignment of daily work schedules. In a similar study, Meyers (2006) documents a different pattern. In her study of the changes in grain processing in Palestine under Roman control she notes that the Romans introduced a new technology that moved the activity of grinding to a commercial context organized by the elites. Initially a task performed by women in their domestic context, grinding became a men's specialized skill under Roman control (according to Jewish texts). Interestingly, Meyers points out both positive and negative consequences of this new order. On one hand, women from lower classes could improve their economic situation using their now-spare time to find an economically recognized activity. On the other hand, women from upper classes were not allowed to work and, therefore, their spare time started to feed the Jewish misogyny linked to the idleness of women (see Wegner 1998, Baskin 2002). Finally, Montón Subías (2007) and Aranda *et al.* (2009) address the question of female identity in Argaric societies (Southeast Iberia, c. 2250–1450 cal. BC) through maintenance activities and their appearance in burial contexts. According to the authors, the exclusive presence of awls in female tombs indicates a conceptual association between women (of all statuses) and the maintenance activities they performed in their daily lives, as the skeletal indicators of activity also indicate. They emphasize the existence of a transversal equality in at least this aspect of female identity.

THE FRAGMENTED PROJECT: POSTMODERN FEMINISM

'Postmodernism' is a word that awakes reactions from all viewpoints; some hate it, while

others consider it the inescapable paradigm. As many have noticed, the term has become a *buzzword* whose meaning is sometimes unclear, slippery and blurry. It means different things to different people and very often those in favour of it and those in opposition do not deal with the same topics (Tanesini 1999). To complicate things further, the relationship with feminism is very problematic. There are firm defenders of linking feminism to postmodernism (Hekman 1990, Flax 1991), while others strongly oppose the combination of such concepts or even see them as contradictory (Benhabib 1992). It is a paradigm that has often been described with reference to its general mood. Postmodernism is a deeply pessimistic view of our present. It is a reaction against the Enlightenment and its immediate consequence: modernity (just as modernity was a reaction against the *anciens régimes* and old traditions). The foundational values of the Enlightenment, such as reason or progress, are considered to be much damaged, if not rotten (as the level of pessimism can vary). Reason is not considered a means to reach true knowledge, and progress is seen as an illusion mainly useful to keep a few in power and many under control. Western liberal democracies illustrate the disasters of modernity and their decadence does not predict a better future.

With respect to epistemology, however, postmodernism entails only two basic principles that have been developed by a number of theories and disciplines: (1) the de-centring of the subject and (2) the partiality of all knowledge. The former makes reference to the loss of confidence in a self-conscious and universal subject. All subjects are instead seen as controlled by external forces emerging from the socio-political-economical context in which they are immersed. Even if all possible efforts are made to be self-reflective and screen out any unwanted values or assumptions, the truth is that nobody has the virtue of being purely objective. As a consequence, the multiplicity of legitimate subjects is mandatory. The latter principle shows the fragmentary

nature of all knowledge plus the belief that it is a tool of power (oppressive or not), not a mere understanding of reality.

When Sandra Harding, back in the 1980s, included feminist postmodernism as the third feminist epistemology, somehow she was making a prediction. In the '80s the post-modern *condition* was experiencing its first steps and many anticipated the formation of a new paradigm in the near future. Now, almost 30 years later, it seems clear that no single corpus has developed. There is no such thing as 'postmodernist theory', just very diverse ways to deal with the two principles described above depending on the nature of disciplines. As far as feminism is concerned, there has been an explicit resistance to bring the two postmodernist premises to a relativist extreme. Feminism as a theory and as a political movement has always been an emancipatory project, eager to understand reality in order to alleviate women's oppression and to build egalitarian societies. As such, feminists cannot afford the 'everything goes' premise that depicts every kind of knowledge as just another discursive formation; they have to keep a moderate and more grounded position. For this reason, it seems that standpoint theory is one of the most successful approaches in bringing together the two inescapable post-modernist premises and the commitment to real politics. It keeps an audacious balance in which they understand the unavoidable blindness of every social location, but still think that subjects are not fully determined by them (Harding 2002). Seemingly, standpoint theories recognize the partiality of knowledge, but still believe that we can evaluate it and differentiate at least between false and *less false* versions. As we have seen, standpoint theories have evolved significantly since the first formulations and now they materialize the post-modern awareness in two different ways: they recognize the multiplicity of standpoints and the importance of intersectionality. Identities such as 'women' are replaced by a multiplicity of irreducible versions comprised by the intersection of different axes of differentiation.

The combination of race, sexuality, ethnicity, sex, gender and class give place to numerous identities whose oppression and narratives cannot be merged into only one. Nevertheless, this does not mean we cannot say anything about 'women' in general without essentializing them. Rather, it means that the shared experiences and/or features are more limited and must be defined with caution (Tanesini 1999).

GENDER THROUGH THE NEW MEDIA IN ARCHAEOLOGY

The concern about the influence of post-modernism in archaeology has been deeply discussed, especially in the context of post-processual archaeology (e.g. Hodder 1991). Bernard Knapp made an extensive review of the issue back in 1996. He provides a deep analysis of all the arguments for and against this controversial issue, showing the nuances and the different *scales* of postmodernist thought that archaeologists have dealt with. In general, he finds that the study of the past has been shown to be possible only under a moderate postmodernist version, given that radical versions reject any attempt to access a real past. The postmodern scepticism about *meta-narratives* and fixed ideas about identity, knowledge or subjects has driven archaeology and other social sciences to be more concerned with 'the unique instead of the general, with "intertextual relations" instead of causality; with the unrepeatable instead of the recurring' (Knapp 1996:138). But archaeology has never abandoned the idea of actually *knowing* the past, given that it is still an empirical discipline with a forceful materiality (Wylie 1994, 2002).

If there is such a thing as postmodern feminist archaeology, it has been endorsed especially by North American archaeologists and it consists only of emphasizing multivocality and intersectionality to a greater degree than previous approaches. As Brumfiel (2006) notes, one of the most recent paths gender archaeology is exploring is the analysis of

variability, influenced by feminist approaches such as intersectionality, that brings to light the need to understand gender as intersected by other variables (Lozano Rubio in press). This comes in tune with recent feminist political agendas that seek to 'create a sympathetic understanding of differences within genders and sameness across genders that will facilitate broad-based political movements capable of achieving social equality' (Brumfiel 2006:32).

Among the most recent and genuinely postmodern examples of gender archaeology developed in North America are the 'adventures in hypertext' carried out by Rosemary Joyce and Ruth Tringham (2007). These authors are currently developing new methodologies that seek to promote multivocality through the use of new digital media. For them, multivocality is one of the key

goals of feminism and the possibilities opened up by new media ease enormously the realization of such an objective. Tringham and Joyce define hypertext as fragments of texts, images and/or videos linked electronically by multiple paths, creating a multi-narrative in which the order and the beginning/ending points are up to the reader. It is the reader's decision where to 'click' and go next. The authors claim that hypertext is a fairer way of displaying archaeological outputs because it conveys a closer analogue to the real process of creating knowledge. More traditional, linear formats do not show the 'contingency and incomplete nature of archaeological arguments' (Joyce & Tringham 2007:329). The immediate consequence of using this methodology is the dissolution of authority. For instance, in *Sister Stories*⁶ (Fig.2), Joyce and her two collaborators present raw data (in this

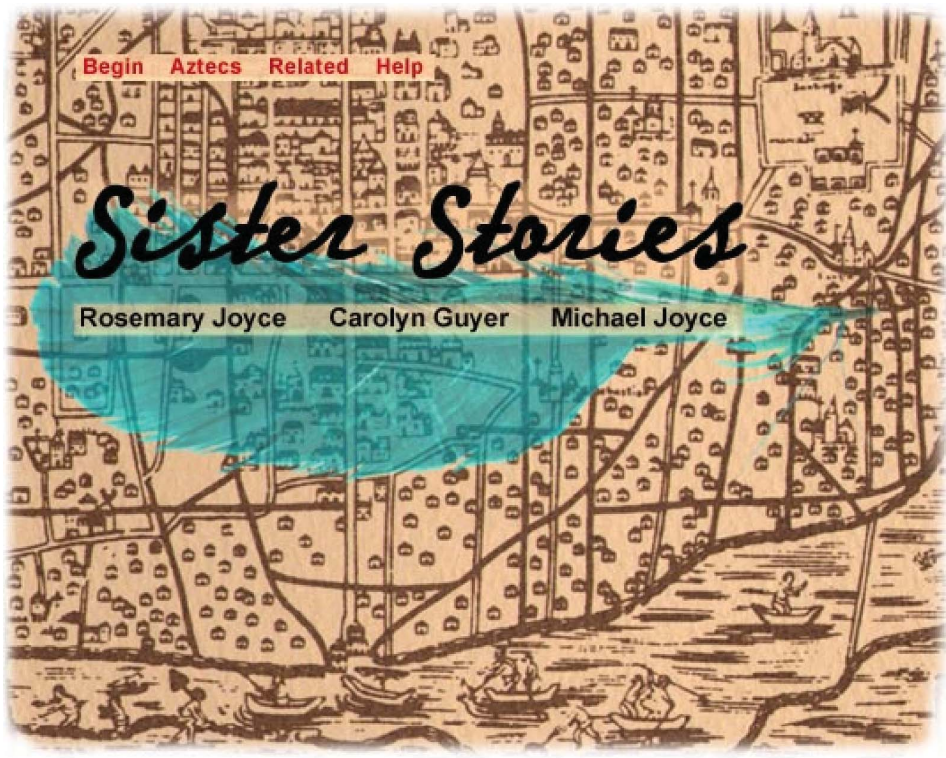


Fig. 2. Official website of *Sister Stories* (www.nyupress.org/sisterstories/index.html). Designed by Carolyn Guyer. Reprinted by permission from the designer.

case Nahuatl texts translated into English) along with some interpretations seeking to engage non-specialists in the creation of their own ideas about the Aztecs (Joyce *et al.* 2002). Nevertheless, the final result is not as engaging as the authors expected, given the constraints that publishers imposed at the time of publication (Joyce pers. comm.). These new methodologies, many of which are based in using aspects of the new media associated with the development and expansion of the Internet, are still being developed.

However, Joyce and Tringham (2007) have already acknowledged some of the weaknesses of these endeavours: for example, the different levels of access to the Internet and new media that are defined with regard to class, gender, sex and ethnicity, and the need for individuals to be able to challenge normative narratives critically. This path is still in its very beginning, it will be a long process of trial and error, and will take time until we see if it has a positive effect in engaging women in the creation of knowledge about the past. Along with what the authors believe, I am certain about the potential for feminist archaeologists to engage in the new means of communication to avoid the monopoly of such media by normative archaeological accounts. Nevertheless, I remain critical about the invisibility of gender inequality that can arise when multivocality is over-emphasized. Sometimes the need to allow the presence of all possible voices in our accounts buries the original aim of revealing gender inequality as a specific form of oppression, intertwined with many others, but still unique in its specificity (in the present and in the past).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have intended to bring something of an *orthoversion* to the field of gender and feminist archaeologies. After at least three decades of work in this area, which builds on an even longer tradition of work in feminist theorizing, feminist philosophy and thought, there is more than adequate work

to warrant a genealogy. Such a genealogy for gender archaeology, which I have shown here to track a path similar to that of feminist epistemology, is important in situating our work in its both local and wider contexts. To some extent, this is a challenge to the usual story of the roots and sources of gender archaeology, a story that, if anyone even bothers to tell it, has gender archaeology as a 'daughter' of post-processualism. Rather, as charted in this paper, it is more the case that gender archaeology developed within certain aspects of processual archaeology as a genre of feminist empiricism, and neither succumbed to the relativisms often associated with post-processualism nor was adopted by many post-processualists, but went its own ways. And it was not just the dismissal or marginalization of gender archaeology and feminist research by many post-processualists that somehow sent gender and feminist work in archaeology down its own path. The evolution of a feminist and gender archaeology is best understood in reference to an engagement with feminist thought and epistemologies. It is this relationship that I have tried to reveal here.

The three broad orientations that I have described coexist in current archaeology, although in different degrees. The feminist empiricist patterns are probably the more common; however, studies following standpoint theory principles are gaining ground in certain contexts. The study of maintenance activities is a good example that illustrates the increasing interest in starting from women's experience to carry out archaeological studies. The challenge now is further to develop standpoint theory approaches to integrate multivocality to a greater degree. Nevertheless, there is a general tendency towards separating feminism and gender archaeology. Recently, in a special issue of the *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* dedicated to doing archaeology as feminists, Erika Engelstad (2007) exposed this situation and demanded a greater engagement with feminist theory if we want to develop a rigorous and

critical gender archaeology. In accordance with her, I consider that there is no reason to refuse an approach that has constituted the very core of gender archaeology and its contributions.

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NOTES

¹This paper deals with the theory of knowledge that lies behind feminist archaeology. I do not discuss the different theoretical models that gender archaeologists have developed to address the study of past societies.

²Feminist epistemologists and archaeologists not only have discussed about the presence of non-epistemic values in science but also they have reconsidered the traditional cognitive values such as 'simplicity' and 'homogeneity', arguing the lack of neutrality of those and suggesting new alternatives (see Longino 1994).

³However, see Flannery and Winter (1976) for a non-gender theorized discussion of male and female activities in a Mesoamerican village.

⁴I do not want to convey the idea that the three feminist epistemologies that I describe follow an evolutionary pattern. They certainly appeared successively but nowadays they overlap.

⁵An antecedent of the *maintenance activities* programme was the *task differentiation approach* developed by Janet Spector (1983, 1991).

⁶*Sister Stories* is accessible online at: <http://www.nyupress.org/sisterstories/index.html>

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