

Teaching with Intent: The Archaeology of Gender

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ABSTRACTS

Abstracto: Este ensayo discute la relación de instruir sobre la expresión política, especialmente el papel de la crítica feminista en el desarrollo de la arqueología y el lugar de esta crítica en la clase.

Résumé: Ce papier aborde la relation de l'enseignement et de l'expression politique, en particulier le rôle de la critique féministe dans le développement de l'archéologie et de la place de cette critique dans les salles de classe.

Every teacher must learn to stop teaching when it is time. That is a difficult art. Very few are able to let reality take over at the right time. Very few know when they are done teaching. However, it is difficult to watch how a pupil will make the same mistake that one has made oneself after one has tried to save him from making these very same mistakes. As hard as it can be not to receive any advice, it is as hard not to be allowed to give any such advice. (Brecht 1967:475)

Embodied Transgression

There is a very real and somewhat unsettling power inherent in the act of teaching, one that we recognise in others occasionally—that charismatic English teacher in junior high school whose sentence diagrams still appear magically in one's head years later, the math teacher whose sadistic classroom performance is partly responsible for the traumatic reaction to numbers that several generations will carry with them to the grave—but do not necessarily associate with ourselves when taking those first tentative steps toward becoming teachers. We also, I think, tend to assume that what students primarily respond to in the classroom is the content of the material and realise only belatedly that teaching is also performance, and that the performer is a critical

aspect of the transmission of knowledge. Most teachers eventually become aware that the message is inextricably tied to the messenger, and they make use of this fact constructively or destructively, depending on their personalities. A few abuse this power, but luckily the relationship is a two-way street and students are generally adept at protecting themselves against such mind games. Teaching by negative example, while not usually an intentional strategy, can nevertheless be quite effective. Personal experience of such instances of reverse pedagogy are why I will never use the phrases “What do you mean, you don’t understand?” or “Only a moron would say/think/believe something like that.”

I knew most of this at least theoretically when I took on my first teaching job. Growing up in a first-generation immigrant household with both parents teaching at a local university, I absorbed a lot of the mechanics of academia early on, but most of my archaeological role models were men—the archaeologists whose books I read as well as those who were colleagues of my parents. I cannot say when I first became aware of the fact that there had been, and were, women archaeologists, but I am fairly certain that it was not until my first or second year of undergraduate work at Yale. The admiration and awe I felt for Faith Hentschel, whose underwater and classical archaeology classes were revelations, and for my first mentor, Sarah Morris, who guided me through my senior thesis, were not just due to their professional accomplishments and abilities, but to the fact that I could see myself in them. They were teaching by example, embodied transgressions in the male-dominated world I had mapped out as my career destination.

Still, it surprised me that I might have a similar impact on students. When I moved to Minnesota to write my thesis, I left behind the professional contacts I had made in the Boston area, so my first job interview was a response to an ad in the local paper for two courses to be taught at Minneapolis Community College (MCC): an introduction to physical anthropology and a course on women in cross-cultural perspectives. I got the job (although the hardest part of the interview turned out to be convincing the administrators that someone with a Harvard Ph.D. would be able to teach their students) and began one of the most exhausting and rewarding teaching experiences of my career. In the end, both courses turned out to be eye-openers, and both made me aware of the short shrift gender receives in archaeological pedagogy and of the power of the person in imparting knowledge. Out of those two courses came two success stories: one an older student who ultimately went on to Hamlin University on a presidential scholarship, where he earned an anthropology degree, the other a female student who transferred to the University of Minnesota, where she received her bachelor’s degree in anthropology and has gone on to a career as a field archaeologist. We transferred to the U of M together, as I spent four years teaching there following a year of teaching at Moorhead State University. When she graduated, she came to my office to tell me that until she saw me standing up there in front of the class, it had never

occurred to her that women could become archaeologists. As I had seen myself in my undergraduate mentors, she saw herself in me, and set off down the path confident that it would not be closed against her.

Gender Bending

Writing this article has opened my eyes to another problem: teaching *about* archaeology is a cottage industry in academic publishing (some archaeologists have made a career of it), but there are virtually no critical studies on the teaching *of* archaeology, either content or process. Indeed, this is not a topic typically included in the training of graduate students either. Even in the few existing cases the emphasis is typically on general pedagogy and not on teaching archaeology in particular. It is therefore perhaps no great surprise to note that published works on teaching gender in courses with archaeological content are rarer than hen's teeth (hint: hen's don't have teeth).

One of the earliest examples of which I am aware remains one of the only publications that explicitly address all three issues of concern in this discussion: gender, archaeology, and teaching (Spector and Whelan 1989). It also happens to be one chapter in the anthology that I took with me to that job interview at the MCC in my attempt to convince the administrators there that I could design a course on women from an anthropological perspective that would work for their students. I have used Sandra Morgen's anthology *Gender and Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching* (1989) in numerous courses since then; it remains one of the few anthropology publications explicitly devoted to pedagogical concerns specific to that field. Significantly, while there have been other publications dealing with archaeology and education, most, like *The Excluded Past: Archaeology in Education* (Stone and MacKenzie 1990), published in the One World Archaeology series, do not include gender in their critical treatments of the transmission of archaeologically derived knowledge.

Since the late 1980s, there has been a spate of archaeology publications dealing with gender, variously aimed at deconstructing the social, historical, political, methodological, and theoretical contexts of gender configurations in the past as well as the social history of women in archaeology as a profession (Balme and Beck 1995; Claassen 1994; Du Cros and Smith 1993; Nelson et al. 1994; Parezo 1993; White et al. 1999; Williams 1981). The progression from "remedial" gender archaeology ("add women and stir") to second- and third-wave gender archaeology has been outlined by various scholars, and apart from providing some recent seminal references (Nelson 1997:13–30; Pyburn 2004:4–6; Sørensen 2000:16–40), I will not review this history here except to note that similar developments occur in the archaeological literature outside the English-speaking world (Arnold 2002a:417–420). Also worth

mentioning is that in the temporal grey zone between archaeology and palaeontology, the physical anthropological literature related to gender provides a complementary counterpart to the archaeological corpus, as well as increased temporal depth (Blaffer Hrdy 1999; Grauer and Stuart-Macadam 1998; Hager 1997).

By about 1990, most archaeologists came to the realisation that gender was an area we could not afford to ignore if our goal was to develop a holistic view of past societies. My interest in the subject, for example, was initially sparked during my dissertation research on the interpretation of a richly outfitted Early Iron Age burial in France as male (Spindler 1983:107–111, Figure 82), in spite of the identification of the skeletal remains as female. This in turn led me to attend the groundbreaking Chacmool Gender Conference (Arnold 1991). The Chacmool Conference was an epiphany for many of the attendees: the first time so many archaeologists with an interest in gender were made aware of the fact that (1) they were not alone and (2) the significance of gender to archaeological interpretation was fast becoming a mainstream rather than a marginal area of investigation.

Teaching was the second way in which I became sensitised to the fundamental importance of gender to archaeological interpretation. I was able to develop a course on archaeology and gender during a one-year stint (1991–1992) at Moorhead State University (an opportunity I owe to Mike Michlovic, who had built up, over many years, an exemplary programme with students of a quality that allowed me to try out several ideas for new classes). This was a learning experience for them as well as for me, as I became aware of the depth and breadth of the misconceptions regarding gender in the general public as well as in my own approach to my work.

The Hairy Chested and the Hairy Chinned

Gender is simultaneously easy and excruciatingly difficult to deal with in a classroom setting. On one hand, getting students to talk about gender is never a problem, because they assume that what they know about the subject is (1) self-evident and (2) universally accepted. On the other hand, this is also why it is so difficult to engage in a critical discussion of the topic. The following assumptions tend to dominate: (1) gender and sex are the same thing; (2) there are only two genders corresponding to two sexes; (3) once an individual is assigned to a gender category (at birth) gender shifts do not occur; (3) Euro-American attitudes toward gender are universal; (4) gender does not affect students' daily lives in any meaningful way. Responses to the idea that gender and sex are mutable and context-specific concepts range from astonished outrage and rejection to quiet epiphany, depending on the student's life experi-

ences. Engaged learning is never a problem, but managing the discussion to make sure that comments do not become derogatory or demeaning can be a challenge.

Attitudes toward gender in general extend to perceptions of gender in archaeological interpretation and within the profession as a whole. One of the first exercises I have students work on in introductory courses with archaeological content is to generate their own definitions of archaeology, including producing a sketch or cartoon of a “typical” archaeologist. Invariably there has never been an exception to date—the “typical” archaeologist is male, usually bearded, and often an obvious knock-off of Indiana Jones. For the gender and archaeology class, the students also define sex and gender and respond to a series of questions. At the end of the semester, I have them complete the same in-class exercise, and then hand back their original responses so that they can compare them and share with the class the most surprising change in their own perception. The “before” versus “after” gulf is usually a large one, and the exercise works well because students get a sense of how much they have learned, not just what grade they have earned.

Large lecture classes like the course on human evolution I teach represent more of a pedagogical challenge, but even here it is possible to incorporate material related to gender into the material. Students must read several articles dealing with primate behaviour and generate two essays that incorporate answers to questions about cooperative behaviour, residence patterns, friendship, child rearing, infanticide, diet, and other relevant themes. The logistics of grading 180 take-home assignments obviously limits the extent to which a dialogue regarding gender stereotypes and assumptions can be developed in such a class, but as a measure of the degree to which such attitudes are entrenched in the public imagination this assignment succeeds admirably. I designate discussion sections specifically to deal with the subject of gender stereotypes and highlight recent research dealing with sex and gender in human and nonhuman primate societies in lectures.

Raising Cain

Teaching as activism can take many forms and archaeology provides much more scope for the application of knowledge of the past to the present than many professional practitioners realise. Nor need activism be restricted to the classroom. I have written elsewhere about the concept of the archaeologist as “public intellectual” (Arnold 2002b:111), inspired by a discussion of the life and career of eminent Australian archaeologist John Mulvaney (Bonyhady and Griffiths 1997), whose 1985 “Who Owns the Past?” seminar at Harvard was the inspiration for my ongoing professional exploration of the symbiotic relationship

between archaeology and politics. The direct application of archaeological expertise and knowledge to current affairs has become an integral part of the careers of some archaeologists. Examples include

1. William Rathje, whose Garbage Project, initiated in 1973 at the University of Arizona, has applied contemporary archaeological techniques to present-day waste disposal patterns, either from fresh household discards or garbage in landfills. He has used this information to explore waste management, dietary consumption, and the relationship between what is wasted and what is recycled across the United States and in Canada, Mexico City, and Sydney, Australia. In addition to working directly with various government agencies, Rathje has written several popular books, including *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, with Cullen Murphy, which have turned archaeologists' main subject of study into a consciousness-raising effort regarding human consumption and waste (Rathje and Murphy 2001).
2. Fekri Hassan, the Petrie Professor of Archaeology at University College London, who has devoted his career to the application of archaeological evidence, mainly from North Africa (particularly Egypt) and the Middle East, to contemporary issues, including tourist development, climate change, and the critical importance of water to human cultures. The latter topic has resulted in his holding numerous public policy positions, including the Steering Committee of UNESCO's Water and Civilization Project. He recently published an edited volume titled *Droughts, Food and Culture* (2002), which will bring the message of conservation and responsible stewardship of water and other resources to the general public.
3. K. Anne Pyburn, whose NSF-funded MATRIX (Making Archaeology Teaching Relevant in the XXI Century) (www.indiana.edu/~arch/saa/matrix/) project at Indiana University–Bloomington is the most recent manifestation of her ongoing career efforts to raise awareness of professional responsibility and ethics in the context of archaeology in the public interest. This has extended to her archaeological fieldwork in Belize, where she has been instrumental in developing cooperative relationships with local communities that address their needs as well as those of the archaeological field programme. Her research has consistently and creatively incorporated gender and social activism with archaeological interpretation, education, and public outreach, culminating most recently in an edited volume entitled *Ungendering Civilization* (2004).
4. Kenneth L. Feder, of Central Connecticut State University, has dedicated his career to producing accessible textbooks and other publications that debunk pseudoarchaeological claims and clearly outline the distinction

between science and pseudoscience. His primary research interests focus on the archaeology of the Native peoples of New England and the analysis of public perceptions about the human past. He is the founder and director of the Farmington River Archaeological Project, a long-term investigation of the prehistory of the Farmington River Valley. His textbook *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*, now in its fourth edition (2005), has influenced thousands of undergraduates in introductory courses across the country (and presumably overseas as well), a significant contribution to the everlasting struggle to maintain some control over how professional archaeology is perceived by the general public.

There are other examples, but these serve to demonstrate how directly relevant the information that archaeology liberates from the long sleep of the past can be, and should be, to our lives in the present. One area in which archaeologists have not sufficiently contributed, at least in the arena of popular publications, is gender. An introductory textbook debunking and demystifying sex and gender stereotypes, past and present, along the same lines as Feder's *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries*, has yet to be written (but is in progress [Joyce forthcoming]), but would certainly be useful. The extent to which public education and outreach efforts by professional archaeologists have neglected gender has had various negative ramifications, including the selective exploitation of archaeological data by groups and individuals who rarely have a grasp of, or interest in, the complexities of the archaeological data regarding past gender configurations. The difficulties of communicating effectively with the general public on the construction of gender in the past and present was made clear to me for the first time when I was asked to fill in for Janet Spector at a Minneapolis Borders bookstore evening discussion group on Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade* (1988) in the early 1990s.

Eisler's publication (touted in a cover blurb of the 1988 paperback edition as "The most important book since Darwin's *Origin of Species*") is one of those mixed blessings, like Steven Spielberg's Indiana Jones character, that represent an opportunity as well as a wake-up call for professional archaeologists. On the one hand, such popular but inaccurate representations of the archaeologically informed past, and of archaeologists, respectively, engage public interest in a way that professional archaeologists by and large fail to do (Arnold forthcoming); on the other hand, some of the messages such representations send are extremely destructive (Indy as the poster child for looting and collecting as respectable, professional activities; Eisler's vision of a utopian "gynocentric" prehistoric past that never existed as a blueprint for a "partnership model" of gender relations, for example). I was very careful in my presentation to remain neutral in my evaluation of Eisler's book that evening, merely outlining the more critical omissions of archaeological

evidence and the fact that the primary (in most cases the only) source consulted was the work of Marija Gimbutas, who has herself been criticised by colleagues over the years (Anthony 1995, among others). I left plenty of time for questions, which I answered in detail and respectfully, but the most subversive thing I did was to distribute a bibliography of reliable archaeological publications on the topics ostensibly covered by Eisler's book. My experience that evening, as in all of the opportunities I have had to interact with the general public in a nonacademic setting, was not that audience members had made up their minds about the subject but that they were eager for information and were open to alternative perspectives presented by professionals. Clearly this is a missed opportunity, an observation some of my students took to heart recently in papers they presented at the Chacmool Fifteenth Anniversary Gender Conference at the University of Calgary (Heydt-nelson forthcoming; Lowry and Pizza forthcoming), indicating that mentoring the next generation of scholars is yet another way to engage in activist pedagogy.

Teaching as activism has been variously described as engaged pedagogy and as a revolutionary act (Karpinski 1995; hooks 1994, among others). There is a reason totalitarian regimes view teaching as both a potential threat and a major opportunity for the dissemination of propaganda, as my own research, and that of others, on the naturalisation of gender configurations in Nazi Germany through the manipulation of archaeological evidence, has demonstrated (Arnold 2004; Hassmann 2002). The politicised conflict over teaching evolution that continues to rage across the United States is a good example of how high the stakes are in this game, and how important it is for those of us with access to databased information to communicate it more effectively. The university classroom remains (at least for now) one of the few places in which such debates can still be conducted without fear of retribution. To return to the Brecht quote with which this article began: The main job of good teaching is to provide students with the tools of critical analysis, and then to give them permission to "think differently." Stepping back and letting them get on with it can be difficult, but the essence of learning is experience, so long as the equipment necessary for success has been provided.

Acknowledgments

I owe a debt to Margaret Atwood, the celebrated Canadian writer, for inspiring the title of this article, which is based on her recent book, *Writing with Intent* (2005). I also would like to thank my parents for never saying, "Girls don't do that." They gave me the confidence and the intellectual courage to pursue a career in a field that might otherwise have seemed as remote as the moon.

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