

Comment on “Dwelling at the Margins, Action at the Intersection? Feminist and Indigenous Archaeologies, 2005”

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The aim of Conkey’s paper is to explore the ways in which different types of archaeologies, in particular feminist and Indigenous archaeologies, overlap or intersect. Conkey argues that by investigating the intersections between feminist and Indigenous archaeologies we may be able to learn something new and “intervene into the . . . structures of power in the production of archaeological knowledge” (10).

Self-reflection is, according to Conkey, the premise for understanding intersections between different types of archaeologies. Conkey thus provides the reader with a brief biography and is overt about her own position and that she speaks for no one but herself.

In her paper, Conkey acknowledges that there has been much debate about the overlap of, for example, Indigenous and Native scholarship. Conkey argues, however, that there are more connections to be made. The focus of the paper is then on investigating these connections, or what Conkey terms “intersectionality,” a term developed in black women’s studies to investigate the interconnections among systems of oppression.

Intersectionality is fundamentally about relationships. Conkey discusses a number of different relationships, noting the importance of understanding hierarchies of associations within relationships, for example, Indigenous, feminist, race, ethnicity, and gender. She goes on to reevaluate the importance of reflecting on alternative viewpoints and awareness of the embedded assumptions we all hold in order to understand these relationships.

Given the focus of the paper on Indigenous and feminist archaeologies, Conkey clearly defines the terms and provides an interesting overview of the development of each area of archaeological pursuit. This provides the foundation to illustrate commonality between the disciplines. Conkey then examines how Indigenous and feminist concerns are linked through the types of issues each discipline confronts (e.g., questions as to what exactly constitutes Indigenous or feminist methodology) and discusses the many questions that are raised through these overlaps. Conkey emphasises that there are many different types of Indigenous archaeologies. The question that then needs to be addressed is whether feminist archaeology can intersect every type of Indigenous archaeology. Can it

not be argued that feminist interpretations of the past in Islamic countries continue to reiterate Western intellectual power (e.g., Blau 2000)?

Conkey focuses on two particular aspects of interpretation (experience and the uses of oral tradition and storytelling) as a means of investigating themes that intersect both Indigenous and feminist archaeologies. Conkey states, "We archaeologists do not often consider how specific experiences have influenced or informed archaeological interpretation" (27). However, this statement disregards the trend in the last century to write biographies of archaeologists (e.g., Diaz-Andreu and Sørensen 1998; Trigger 1980). Such texts were written as a means of understanding the conscious and subconscious biases of practitioners, which inevitably affect the questions archaeologists ask of material culture and their subsequent interpretations. Conkey does, however, raise pertinent questions about whose experiences count or matter when interpreting the past, and she looks at the contributions feminist and Indigenous archaeologies have made to address these questions.

Conkey stresses that there are many areas where an intersectional approach may be productive, but she looks specifically at the study of gender roles and the consideration of space. She provides convincing examples from North American studies that illustrate the ways in which established practises in, for example, feminist archaeology can augment practise in Indigenous archaeology, particularly in reevaluating Indigenous gender roles.

Conkey acknowledges that the different agendas of Indigenous and feminist archaeologists will inevitably lead to tensions about perceived priorities. While differences will exist, Conkey argues that there is sufficient commonality to ensure a productive relationship. Intersectionalities are therefore promoted.

Overall, Conkey's paper provides interesting, if wordy, thoughts on the importance of reflection on how we as archaeological practitioners relate, communicate, and assert particular power hierarchies. In essence, this paper intellectualises a basic tenet: the importance of self-reflection in the recognition of differences and similarities and the subsequent attribution of importance. As with many theoretical discussions within archaeology, such contemplations are not new to the discipline or the social sciences. While intersectionality may lay the foundations for improved pluralistic interpretations, questions as to exactly whose version of the past is heard remain complicated.

References Cited

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