

# Beyond Theory: Queer Theory in Practice

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## Introduction

Since its introduction, queer theory has found a comfortable niche in archaeology, being used to elucidate elements of identity in archaeological actors and reinforcing post-processual alternatives. It has also created room for queer (see note 1) archaeologists, encouraging a consideration of the identity of the archaeologist in relation to our interpretations. However, despite this development, queer theory remains just that- theory. In comparable groups, such as the feminist critique, we see a practical application in addition to the theoretical, where attempts have been made to increase archaeology's inclusiveness for women. This speaks to a larger problem in archaeology, where the theoretical frameworks that guide archaeology are seen as separate from the practical side of archaeology.

Despite the interest in gender, particularly in prehistory, where work surrounding "third gender" and "ritual" gender burials have made careers, we still see no well-known trans\* archaeologists (see note 2). This exclusion is rarely, if ever questioned within the discipline, which seems ironic considering the academic interest. Why are we so interested in trans\* people in the past when we make no efforts to include them in our work today?

Perhaps if the exclusion of LGBTQ people from archaeology changed, we would see a subject that is more openly aware of discussions of gender and sexuality in the modern day, and would be more capable of applying these ideas to archaeological evidence.

This article attempts to tackle the separation of archaeology from modern day LGBTQ communities and people, encouraging a change from an archaeology that relies on queer archaeologists to create their own space, to one that encourages and supports LGBTQ participation.

## Theory to Practice

This section will focus on identifying some of the major issues that face LGBTQ people and interpretations involving LGBTQ people, and by problematizing them, focus on setting out achievable methods for both individual archaeologists, and wider teams or organisations to foster an inclusive, LGBTQ friendly archaeological practice.

### Biological essentialism

Biological essentialism is, in short, the belief that biology overrides all else, that species have an essential behaviour (Devitt 2008, 344). Whilst supporting pillars of biological essentialism such as the "Man the hunter" theory is now falling from the mainstream of archaeology (Sterling 2014, 153), we have still failed to progress further to tackle the seeds of this theory. It is still common to hear the argument that "men" are stronger (repeated by students in every discussion on subsistence strategies), with no critique

as to whether a man automatically means male (Sterling 2014, 152). Deeper questions about the existence of binary genders (and sexes) are overlooked, leading to particular problems in prehistoric archaeology (Geller 2005, 600), and when examining groups who have not traditionally displayed the modern stereotypical western gender identities (Moral 2016, 788).

Recognition that gender is not truly connected to biological sex is essential for accurate portrayals of the past. An attempt to reconstruct the reproductive capacity of a population is never going to be accurate based solely on biological sexing. It must also take into account social role of these bodies. Not all genders may be reproductive for instance, and socialisation may lead to individuals not reproducing (Geller 2005, 601). This is separately (and more acceptably seen and described) in instances of celibacy. Recognising that some individuals may be playing a societal role that does not entail reproduction or does not allow reproduction in a way consistent with their sex is essential for studying past societies. Considering the role reproduction has in creation and maintenance of gender should also be considered (Radha Krishna and Alsuwaigh 2015, 174).

Also falling into the category of biological essentialism is the exclusion of intersex people from archaeological practice and theory. Intersex people represent around 1% of the population (Blackless et al. 2000, 159), however in some areas this may be higher (Blackless et al. 2000, 159). Despite this high rate of occurrence a DNA sexing cannot detect non-XX or XY DNA, and little if any research has been done to resolve this (Fredengren 2013, 62). From a morphological point of view, skeletal sexing can have little use in identifying intersex individuals (Geller 2017, 89). Unfortunately, archaeology still seems trapped by the idea of binary sexes; even if, in some aspects, we have moved past binary genders. Tackling this idea relies on developing some method of identifying intersex individuals in the archaeological record, and developing a theoretical framework (based off queer theory potentially) to include them in archaeological interpretations.

#### “Exotic” Genders

Whilst tackling the concepts of binary sexes and associated genders is essential, archaeologists must be careful to avoid drifting in to the exotification of certain genders, specifically when considering the link between this and colonialism (Lugones 2007, 188). Terms such as “third gender” can only be described as overused in archaeology, with archaeologists seeming to forget that there are still people belonging to minority groups who identify as third gender (Towle and Morgan 2002, 469). Re-using this term to describe actors in the archaeological record that do not belong to these groups is therefore clearly inappropriate.

Related to this is the conflation of non-binary genders and ritual purpose, particularly shamanism (Hollimon 2017, 54). By looking at this in a critical manner we can deconstruct the “othering” of non-western binary genders. This conflation leads to an unnuanced representation of genders in other cultures. Labelling an entire group of people as “ritual” with no consideration seems an over simplistic leap, and also erases the potential variation within the group. The colonial aspect of this should also be considered, where we label all unknowns (those who do not conform to a western gender binary) as others, or exotic (Towle and Morgan 2002, 469).

#### Overarching trans\*phobia and misogyny

Linking both these previous areas (and a myriad of other factors that for brevity have been excluded) is the pervasive culture of trans\*phobia and misogyny, both within archaeology and wider society. Perhaps due to the scarce nature of evidence in archaeology we have retained an overly binary and essentialist way of viewing sex and gender. This does not, however, excuse it. As well as impacting our interpretations (creating simplistic reflections of dominant systems in the modern day), we also

negatively affect our practice. Anecdotal evidence of men hurting themselves in the field whilst trying to prove their “strength” is common, as is the feeling amongst women and trans\* people of being excluded and feeling unsafe in fieldwork. Aspects of misogyny such as cat calling and some elements of “men are stronger” biological essentialism are being tackled, yet work to dismantle more pervasive aspects of misogyny and trans\*phobia is still in it’s infancy.

## Summary

This article through exploring and outlining some of the barriers to LGBTQ (particularly trans\*) participation in archaeology has shown the need for the application of queer theory to archaeological practice as well. Whilst theoretical articles calling for inclusiveness have their value, I believe that having clear actionable points will allow for a broader move to a practice that includes queer people. Laid out below are some points to exercise that will tackle some of the major barriers faced by LGBTQ people in modern archaeological practice.

### Suitable Facilities

Having facilities (namely toilets and showers in the field) that all are able to use is an essential first step. Having your gender identity invalidated every time you need to wee seems an unnecessary attack, and one that can be easily avoided. Especially during field work, having appropriate facilities is essential, and yet it is often over looked.

- Sanitary bins in all bathrooms
  - By recognising that all genders can menstruate (as sex and gender are not connected) it becomes clear that making sanitary bins available for all is essential. In remote field work this becomes especially important, and could be paired with keeping sanitary products (pads and tampons) in an easily accessible place, such as the first aid kit.
- Non-gendered bathroom (both toilet and showers if present)
  - A non-gendered bathroom allows for those who may not identify with the western gender binary to use a bathroom that does not invalidate their gender identity. This facility should not also be the disabled toilet as that should be separately available to allow for accessibility. Simply labelling a bathroom as “toilet” or “W.C” will cover this; there is no need to label bathrooms with a gender. Descriptors such as cubicles or urinals may also be useful.
- Men’s and women’s areas
  - If camping or in dormitories during fieldwork, considering whether splitting sleeping quarters into men’s and women’s is essential. Non-binary and trans\* individuals may feel excluded and targeted by doing this, especially if they are assigned to an area inconsistent with their identity. Be considerate and thoughtful, and if unsure, ask someone where they are most comfortable sleeping if this division is necessary.

### Language

Language includes both the way that systems influence our work and how our work influences external systems. Considering the impact of our language is essential for a responsible archaeology (Bondi 2007, 69) that is aware of the impact we can have on the external world.

- Colonial and imperialist language
  - As discussed above, using language belonging to oppressed groups and minorities should be used extremely cautiously, as to avoid conflating ancient groups and modern

communities, as well as using language that has meaning beyond what archaeologists intend. Defining what the language you're using is intended to mean is essential, and checking whether the language you use has other meanings is equally important.

- Sexist language
  - Whilst overtly sexist language is now frowned upon, “micro aggressions” remain common, especially during field work. Undertones of old thought patterns such as physical differences remain, reinforced by habits of splitting people into men’s and women’s teams. By having mixed teams the binary gender view can be avoided, and all can be offered equal access to different tasks and areas in site.
- Language and othering
  - Language is a core part of othering, used to create and maintain separation and relationships between groups. By challenging ideas that being cis or binary gendered is the norm we can tackle this othering, allowing trans\* and non-binary individual to be included. Whilst the concept of the “deviant” is core to queer theory (Dowson 2000, 163) this does not mean we should force this onto individuals in modern practice.
  - Practices of de-centring cisgender individuals are essential, particularly in learning environments. For seminar leaders and lecturers, introducing yourself with pronouns allows that to become the norm and does not ‘other’ any individuals who feel they must clearly assert their pronouns. Questioning pronouns is inappropriate, and if someone asks you to use a particular set, it is both polite and validating to use them. Purposefully misusing their pronouns may be a form of discrimination (Pettigrew 2016, 9).

Figure 1: An Example of a pronoun introduction.

Seminar leader: “Welcome class, my name is Alex, and my pronouns are she/hers! Welcome to this module on Theory, please introduce yourselves with pronouns.”

Student A: “Hi, I’m Ashley, and I use they/them”

Student B: “I’m Ben and use he/him and I live with Ashley”

### Critique

Perhaps the most important element of queer theory to integrate into every day is critique, both of our own practice and wider paradigms of practice. By looking at our practice in a critical manner we can integrate new areas of study, particularly those from sociology and gender studies. We should also look critically at our practice to examine if there are other ways that we can make our discipline more inclusive. Aspects such as application forms and other admin have not been included but are equally important. This article is not intended as an exhaustive guide, but as a start to forge an archaeological practice that utilises queer theory to encourage diversity and inclusiveness.

## Conclusion

Altering our practice will make archaeology more inclusive to women and other genders that have been traditionally excluded and marginalised. Through doing this we can make sure that both practical and theoretical sides of archaeology more accurately represent the variety of gender identities present. This can only be a positive thing for archaeology, as by involving a wider variety of people our community will become more representative, and by extension, so will our interpretations and methods. Archaeology is

perhaps most valuable to these marginalised groups, as we represent a way of finding heritage and community. *The value of knowing there have always been people like you and always will be is always understated.* A representative, inclusive archaeology has the potential to present this, increasing our relevance to modern day discussions of identity and other themes.

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### Notes

1. Queer and LGBTQ are used somewhat interchangeably here, however both for this work include those who do not simultaneously identify as heterosexual, heteroromantic and cisgender.
2. Trans\* broadly means those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. Cisgender is the opposite of this. Here I have cannibalised the phrase to include archaeological individuals who do not conform to modern western binary-gender, as this is more inclusive than “third gender” and “ritual” descriptors.

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