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Gender & Queer Archeology

Gender Archeology explores the construction of gender ideologies and how they were portrayed in the past. Highlighting the developing roles of women and feminism in ancient society, whether or not the histories are accurate, due to misogynistic, closed-minded interpretations of the abilities of women. While a very complex and important aspect of archeology, I would like to expand on Gender Archeology and look at groups outside of the binary of Men and Women and highlight misinterpreted and lost histories of historical queerness, and the suppression of non-traditional forms of gender and sexual identities. While Gender Archeology is focused on uncovering women's roles in that society outside of a biased ideology, Queer Archeology is focused on dismantling the heteronormative binary of male or female. Gender and Queer Archaeology have the same main goal which is to provide context and relevance to under-represented groups within the archeological field where the two differ in the group they mean to highlight. Queer Archeology destabilized the traditional binary of gender construction intervening with archeological interpretations of gender. Queer Archaeology emerged in the 1990s

in conversation with queer theory. It asked a broader question than Gender Archeology, it expands on the points of “Is this male or female?” or “What roles are given?” but asks the questions of, what kind of identities were possible, and how did they fit within ancient society? So quite like Gender Archeology, Queer Archeology challenges the Western binary that looms over modern archeology, to broaden the understanding of identities lost to the misogyny and bigotry of the Western world.

It was during the 1980s that feminist ideologies became mainstream in the archaeological world, because of the work done in feminist archaeology, that Queer Archaeology would be able to come to making its debut into mainstream in the *World Archaeology* special issue titled *Queer Archeologies*, which is credited to Thomas Dobson, This is largely considered to be the foundational text of Queerness in Archaeology (Aimers). Since this issue was published archeologies have started to question the binary opinions they have taken for granted, with queer theory being the catalyst they needed to begin dismantling that binary and challenge those assumptions. Heteronormativity has plagued the field of archeology because of our current Western views and ideologies, and has organized findings as such, not taking into account the fact that the ideas of gender binary have changed and developed over time to something completely different in the modern world than the ancient world. An example of a heteronormative lens impacting the accuracy of archeological findings is that of the Viking burial in London where the gender of the bodies was identified by the goods they had buried with them, assigning items like swords to male and items like jewelry to females. In this, the ratio turned out to be much more even than their original

assessment of an overwhelming male presence, based on their assumptions. While we could look at this as females simply taking on what we see to be Western male roles, it's hard to make assumptions based only on burial findings; we can't say for sure that our interpretations are the truth. We can make informed opinions on the matter but there is the possibility that some of these people could have been queer, in addition to the fact of women being buried in the same respect as men.

Archaeologists can identify queerness from the past by utilizing queer theory. And to do this, they have to acknowledge the fluidity of past societies rather than the direct search for modern-day labels. This would involve examining how past societies constructed gender and sexuality, and being open minded to the possibility of diverse representations of gender and expression that differ from modern formulas. In Prague, archaeologists uncovered a male body buried, surrounded by jugs and positioned in a way traditionally reserved for women. The body dates back to 2900 B.C. The lead archaeologist is quoted saying "From history and ethnology, we know that people from this period took funeral rites very seriously, so it is highly unlikely that this positioning was a mistake," in addition "Far more likely is that he was a man with a different sexual orientation, homosexual or transgender."(The Week.) Another relevant example comes with the homosexual carvings within the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep in Egypt, two manicurists to the king. The carvings consisted of the two men embracing and performing intimate acts that were traditionally only seen by male and female individuals. While there is still discourse about the nature of this relationship (Reeder), I firmly believe that this falls into the category of looking at history through a Western

lens. Seeing as these same styles of carvings have been seen between husband and wife, it seems likely that this would be the case here with these two men. This can be compared with the discourse between the discovery of female bodies found with traditionally male burial rites and how they are deemed as a “mistake” or interpreted entirely differently from the way they are with men. This is the same case a queer story being altered for the sake of heteronormativity.

One of the more prominent examples of queerness being squashed by Western Colonialism is that of Two-Spirit people, a group of people within the indigenous community that was recognized with respect and honor until European settlers assimilated indigenous communities into the near extinction of the idea of the Two-Spirit community. Leaving Two-Spirit people with less recognition than they deserved within their own community. It's because of archeological findings that we are now able to understand the role that Two-Spirit individuals played, rather than assuming indigenous cultures had the same Western ideologies of gender roles. Like other examples, the findings of Two-Spirit individuals heavily rely on burial sites, and the clothing and tools the person was buried with. In Casas Grande, Mexico, three indigenous bodies were discovered, all with opposite gender burial markers to their sex. While it isn't right to say with certainty that these individuals identified outside of the binary, as they aren't here to speak on it themselves, there is significant evidence to assume that in this case, the individuals identified outside the gender binary (Dimekie).

Many groups outside of the Western world also have terms to associate with gender non conforming people. For example, we can look at Samoan cultures which

have The term “Fa'afafine” which refers to the acceptance of a third gender or identifying outside the gender binary; these people were born male but take on more feminine attributes and behaviours in Samoan culture. These people don't identify as transgender, but as an entirely different aspect in a distinct cultural category unique to Samoa (Tan). I bring up this example as it shows that different cultures have their own interpretations of the gender binary and identities that fall into it. This further pushes the fact that we can not make these biased assumptions based on burial surroundings and born genetics; There could be many different ways of identification that we don't know about, and by making biased assumptions, we are erasing those histories without even understanding them to begin with.

Archaeology can be used as a tool of social justice. By unearthing histories of marginalized communities, archaeology can provide historical context for groups ostracized in today's society, where it proves that women have been doing traditionally male tasks since the dawn of time, or that queer people have been existing and celebrated all across history. Archaeological practices have been at the forefront of uncovering lost histories since their development outside of gender. We see that the usage of ground penetrating radars was the cause of identifying all of the unmarked graves of residential school victims here in Canada (Saipens). Archaeological methods have allowed us here to look into the past and see the horrors, and triumphs of human history; however, archaeologists have taken those findings and developed their own story. We just have to be certain that those stories are as accurate as possible and don't do the findings an injustice.

Both Gender and Queer Archaeology serve an essential aspect of the limits of traditional archeological practices. In questioning the traditional binary aspects of the Western heteronormative world, by taking these approaches to archeological findings develop a more accurate understanding of gender and queerness in the past. Queer Archeology in particular allows us to consider the full potential of diverse human experience. Experiences that have been shrouded by colonial perspectives of what life should have been, heteronormativity, and misogyny. These examples include the Prague Burials, the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, and the recognition of the Two-Spirit and Fa'afafine people. We see the possibility to interpret histories as queer, seeing things through a more inclusive point of view. With the evolution of archeology, it holds the power to rediscover the past and reframe it to acknowledge the people who lived outside the binary, whose histories are becoming lost.

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