Joan M. Gero (26 May 1944-14 July 2016)

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Joan M. Gero changed our individual and collective professional lives in archaeology, whether we realize it or not. She was a light shining into neglected areas of our discipline, forcing archaeologists to reflect on our ideals, practices, and theories. Her passing hits close to home for many, as if part of our own intellectual souls passed with her.

Joan Gero was a leading scholar in the sociopolitics of archaeology and feminist archaeology with a geographical focus on the Andes of Peru and Argentina. She was born in New York City, and received her B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania in English literature (1968) and an M.Ed. from Boston College (1970). A stint in the Teacher Corps inspired her commitment to social activism, and a summer program sponsored by the University of Oxford that exca-
vated an Iron Age site in Wiltshire introduced
her to archaeology. She participated as a crew
member there in 1968 and 1969. Her first field
experience in the Andes was in 1973 with Har-
vard’s Chan Chan Project in the Moche Valley
of Peru with Michael Moseley. This led her to
graduate school at the University of Massa-
chusetts-Amherst, where she received her Ph.D.
in 1983.

Early in her career she encountered the daily
intellectual sexism she would combat for de-
cades. Her doctoral dissertation examined the
manufacture and use of lithic tools by women at
Huaricoto, a Preceramic site in the Callejón de
Huaylas, Peru where she worked for fifteen
months in 1978 and 1979. Though a
provocative topic at the time, her cumulative
work has made this concept relatively uncontro-
versial today.

Although she worked on excavations in
New England (1976, 1980), Labrador (1971,
1983), and South Carolina (1985), Joan main-
tained interest in Andean Formative cultures,
along with the Recuay of the Late Intermediate
Period, especially through her Proyecto Queyash
in the Callejón de Huaylas. Based at the Univer-
sity of South Carolina (1983–1997) and at
American University (1998–2007), her feminist
and activist archaeologies crystalized, and her
resistance to ideas of the archaeological estab-
lishment was polished and published. She also
taught at the Universities of Cambridge (U.K.),
Uppsala and Umeå (Sweden), the Universidad
Nacional del Centro de Buenos Aires and the
Universidad de Catamarca (Argentina), as well
as at the Universidad de Magdalena (Colom-
bia). She was a Research Associate at the
Smithsonian Institution’s Department of An-
thropology. She received numerous grants,
including awards from the National Endowment
for the Humanities, the National Science Foun-
dation, the Fulbright Foundation, the Wenner-
Gren Foundation, Sigma Xi, the Heinz Family
Foundation, the Center for Field Research,
Dumbarton Oaks, the University of South Caro-
lina, and American University. She was a life-
time fellow of Clare Hall, Cambridge.

Joan worried that her theoretical writings on
feminist and household archaeology would
overshadow her meticulous excavations, careful
analyses, and measured reporting. She exposed
the biases of the discipline, including the por-
trayals of women, stone tool making, Paleo-
Indian stereotypes, households, research fund-
ing, representations in National Geographic
magazine, and the financial and intellectual
oppression of scholars from developing nations.

These concerns led her to work to develop
and raise the profile of the World Archaeologi-
cal Congress in the late 1980s. From 1999 to
2008 she was their nationally elected Senior
North American Representative. She was an
organizer of the 5th World Archaeology Con-
gress held at Catholic University in Washing-
ton, D.C. in 2003. Two hundred and thirty
participants from indigenous and low-income
countries were supported by the WAC. Never-
theless, the WAC stood on firm financial
ground for years following. From 2003 until
2008 she was the Head Series Editor of the One
World Archaeology books sponsored by the
WAC. In 2003 she became a founding member
of the advisory board for Archaeologies: The
Journal of the World Archaeological Congress.

Along with her husband Stephen Loring,
she received the WAC’s Lifetime Achievement
Award. She also received the Squeaky Wheel
Award from the American Anthropological
Association Committee on the Status of
Women in Archaeology (2007). Her volume
Engendering Archaeology (1991), edited with
Margaret Conkey, was both a landmark and a
theoretical shift for archaeology.
With Anita Cook, and support from Monica Barnes and the Society of Woman Geographers, she organized the Twenty-fourth Annual Meeting of the Northeast Conference on Andean Archaeology and Ethnohistory at American University (2005) and at the SWG International Headquarters. Joan was an important supporter of the Northeast Conference, having presented at the initial one and authoring or co-authoring a total of seven Conference papers. Her earliest was part of *Investigations of the Andean Past*, the first volume of papers from the Northeast Conference.

Despite all her accolades and her reprimands of the discipline, Joan did not take herself too seriously and had a well-known lighter side, manifested daily in the field or lab, and at parties or fiestas, and occasionally in publications (see Loring and Gero 2012).

I first met Joan in 1974 at UMass-Amherst when she was a graduate student who reached out to befriend struggling undergrads like me. By 1977 she had pushed to teach a seminar called “Big Moments and Great Debates in Archaeology”. Her small seminar was the only one I had at UMass, where some classes had five hundred students. Joan’s class was designed to give senior anthropology majors a taste of grad student seminars in a friendly and nurturing setting. I’m sure I learned more in her class than any other I took as an undergraduate. Many of her future archaeological interests were on display, including artifact typology, lithic technology, sexism in analysis and interpretation, the emerging feminist perspective, and our unwillingness to recognize ambiguity in our data. Archaeology became a bigger and more complex universe that semester!

In 1979, I traveled in Peru, busing my way on the grueling gringo tourist trail through Huancayo, Ayacucho, Cusco, and Machu Picchu. Joan was then in Huaraz, in the Callen de Huaylas, working on the lithics of the Preceramic site of Huaricoto for her dissertation. Richard Burger was conducting the excavations. After months on the road, I arrived by hitchhiking into Huaraz as a bedraggled and broke mess. Joan procured a room with a local family, where I lived for three months. During that time, I helped her draw and chart lithics by day. She paid my rent and bought me a *pensión* (restaurant set meals) out of her Fulbright scholarship, plus paid me the equivalent of about one dollar a day. That would buy me a snack, an oversized beer, and a movie! Back then Joan had three big ideas: lithic tools were overlooked in the Andes because of the huge emphasis on ceramics; unifacial lithic industries were important in culture history because of their use on plants instead of in hunting; and women were making and using lithics much more than was being recognized by male-dominated Andean archaeologists. We spent those months poring over lithics together while playing Lucinda Williams, Keith Jarrett, Ry Cooder, and Modern Jazz Quartet cassettes. Many of my lifelong research (and musical) interests were shaped by those months of conversations and experience.

In 1998 Joan asked me to come to Yutopian in Northwest Argentina to work with her on that Formative site as the project archaeobotanist. The story of how Joan found Yutopian is one of the greatest archaeology stories ever told. After a long, futile search for Formative sites in the isolated, high altitude Santa María and Cajón Valley area, she took ill and was incapacitated in the field with a high fever. She was picked up by a group of passing pilgrims, who included Jorge Chaile, a traditional healer. The group was traveling on pilgrimage to “recharge” the power of one of their saints. The Chaile family took Joan to their compound deep in the isolated valley, where her fever broke and she awoke after days of herbal treatment. Joan related that as she opened her eyes, her Argen-
tine assistant excitedly came to her bedside. “You won’t believe this.” Behind the Chaile compound was a flat-topped hill, on which stood the Yutopian site!

My work at Yutopian was building a low water usage flotation tank (a planter and plastic Sprite bottle being key components), helping around the excavations, processing soil samples, and collecting comparative specimens. It was unusually difficult fieldwork and living conditions, even for the Andes. I remember those as the brightest of days: tremendous intellectual and physical challenge (far from electricity or running water), and sunlight at a dazzling site, with its semi-subterranean house clusters. Under Joan’s tutelage, the Chailes had become expert trowelers and the excavations were precise and immaculate. Condors circled overhead, and Álvaro Chaile even took me jaguar hunting (thankfully we didn’t find any). There were three days stuck inside an adobe hut while a wild wind and sandstorm (La Sonda) blasted Yutopian. My flotation tank was blown more than a mile away. Nothing phased Joan much. Days like those, and evenings, were spent organizing, note-taking, and in deep intellectual discussions including her two students. I remember Joan installing a solar panel for the Chailes and everyone taking turns cooking meals and baking cakes from scratch in our solar oven.

During the Yutopian days, Joan’s thoughts turned to how to operationalize feminist archaeology and deal with the ambiguity of archaeological results. What makes an archaeological project feminist? Besides having a heightened awareness of the roles of women and children in prehistory, Joan thought that communal, inclusive, and decentralized decision-making at the site was a key attribute. All involved were supposed to think for themselves and contribute to the project accordingly, despite rank or experience. She allowed great freedom for others to pursue various lines of thought, even those with which she disagreed. I struggled with the presence of cultivated plants far above their normal altitude and the large footprint of low productivity agriculture for small settlements of a few extended families. I called it “extensive agriculture” as opposed to “intensive agriculture”. Joan never really bought into this idea, but she did let me publish it in the Yutopian book, so long as it was stated that the idea was “ambiguous.”

Yutopian: Archaeology, Ambiguity and the Production of Knowledge in Northwest Argentina (University of Texas Press, 2015) is Joan’s final post-modern love letter to archaeology. It is a deliberate labor of many years, in which she refused to believe in absolute truths, and pushed for multiple parallel interpretations. She was trying to set yet another example for archaeologists: to be less sure of ourselves and to think about the gaps between our data and interpretations.

Sometimes I see Joan’s experience in finding Yutopian as an allegory for life. We can search for our path, but it might take unexpected misfortune, followed by luck and community support from surprising places, to be successful. Our pilgrimage in life intersects with those of other people in ways we cannot imagine or understand. When a unique opportunity comes our way, we must strive to use it to generate knowledge and help people and communities, no matter how arduous or difficult the road. I think that all of us who knew and worked with Joan felt that these were unique, lucky and precious opportunities.

Joan Gero passed away on 14 July, 2016. My last email thread with her was about the published Yutopian book. Did I like it? The answer was yes. I was proud of her perseverance to push through the writing of such a difficult and complex book long after the sparkle of fieldwork had faded. I thought she had given up on it, but she was looking to highlight how archaeologists should be humbler and less certain about our
interpretations. Did I agree with the book, she asked? Much of it, yes, but no, not all of it, I replied. True to character, she stated that she would have been disappointed if I had just said yes. She also wrote often about her passion for Bernie Sanders and her participation in his presidential campaign.

At the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, held in Vancouver in late March 2017, a tribute session to Joan was held, called “Perturbing the Peace”, organized by Tamara Bray and Benjamin Alberti. Twelve discussants, each speaking for five to eight minutes, and almost one hundred people crowded into one of the smaller conference rooms. People stood in the back and sat in the aisle. Some discussants knew her well and others were strongly influenced and inspired from afar. Several themes repeatedly emerged: she gave opportunities to people at key and difficult moments of their lives; she was a “rescuer” of enormous personal generosity, including opening her (and husband Stephen Loring’s) house to innumerable visitors; she gave hope and encouragement to those who felt oppressed or outside the mainstream of archaeology; and her professional work continually bucked mainstream thinking in archaeology. Furthermore, she put what might be considered abstract ideas into practical field, lab, and writing applications.

Near the end of the session, Joan’s brother, Michael Gero, stood to make brief comments. To paraphrase, he said that he had “learned two things.” First was that he knew his sister had done archaeology and seemed to like it. He didn’t know that “she was such a big deal.” She was a big deal! Second, Joan and he had come from a small family, and he had long thought that Joan had little or no family. Michael looked around the room and gestured, “she had a very big family.” There was not a dry eye in the house.

The emotion from the Thursday afternoon session carried over into Friday morning in several sessions, including one on “putting the heart and emotion back into archaeology”. Various sessions appeared to represent a trend away from dispassionate science and objectivity and a move toward uncovering and recognizing the emotions already inherent in archaeological practice. I’m not sure Joan would agree or even countenance the trend toward emotionality that her passing seems to have sparked. Tammy Bray shared a story about Joan’s last radio interview, when she told her interviewer, “Go ahead, ask me how I want to be remembered.” Her interviewer acquiesced. Joan stated, “I want to be remembered as a damn good archaeologist.”

Based on the SAA conference experience, Joan Gero’s spirit is alive and present in the ways that many teach and practice archaeology. We strive to live up to her technical, theoretical, and intellectual standards and try to emulate her warmth and generosity in our personal and professional relationships. She is greatly missed but not gone.

WORKS BY AND ABOUT JOAN GERo

Published works by Joan Gero

Gero, Joan M.
1978 Summary of Experiments to Duplicate Post-excavational Damage to Tool Edges. Lithic Technology 7(2):34.


Presentations by Joan Gero


1988b Panelist, The Decline of Empires Conference, University of South Carolina.


1991b Gender and Power in Knowledge Construction. Keynote address, Women in Archaeology Conference, Charles Sturt University, Albury, New South Wales, Australia. Also presented as an invited lecture at the Anthropology Colloquium, University of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, February.


1991h Archaeology (In) Forms. Invited lecture, Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, U.K. November. Also presented at the University of Glasgow, Glasgow, U.K., November.


1992c Discussant, symposium Ten Years of Post-Pro cessual Archaeology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

1993a Constructing Paleom-an: Engendered Field Practice. Department of Anthropology, Distinguished Lecture Series, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.


1993g The Women and Men of Recuay. Invited lecture, University of Virginia, Charlottesville and Catholic University, Washington, D.C., November.

1994a Femodoxy: A Challenge to Orthodox Field Methodology. Invited symposium Gender As If It Really Matters: Feminist Thinking and Archaeological Practice, 93rd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Atlanta, Georgia, 30 November–4 December.


1997d The Context is Us! Invited lecture, Archaeology Department, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, December.

1998a Honoring Ambiguity. Invited presentation, advanced seminar Doing Archaeology as a Feminist. School of American Research, Santa Fe, New Mexico, April.


1999c Discussant, Comparative Method in a World Context. Anthropology and Archaeology in Dialogue Seminar, Athens, Greece.


2001a Sex Pots of Ancient Peru. Keynote paper, Prehistory in a Global Perspective: Conference in Honor of Randi Haaland, Bergen Norway, September. Also presented as an invited lecture at the University of California, Berkeley (February 2002), at the Twenty-second Northeast Conference on Andean Archaeology and Ethnohistory, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (1–2 November 2003), as an invited lecture to the Archaeological Institute of America, Washington, D.C. (May 2009), and as Huacos y Sexo, an invited lecture, University of Buenos Aires Museo Etnográfico. (June 2004b).


2004a Can Feminist Archaeologies Co-Exist with Mainstream Practice? Symposium, Archaeology and the Study of Gender 20 Years Later, 69th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, 31 March–1 April.


2006a  Here Comes Aliens–Do We Dig Them? World Archaeological Congress Inter-Congress Symposium, The Ethics of Practice in International Archaeological Research, Osaka, Japan.

2006b  Discussant, Gender and Symbiosis. World Archaeological Congress Inter-Congress Symposium, Osaka, Japan.


2006d  Sexpots of the Moche and Recuay. Invited lecture, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, 7 April.


2011  Testimony of Dr. Joan M. Gero on Behalf of the Society for American Archaeology Before the Cultural Property Advisory Committee on the Renewal of the MOU between the Republic of Peru and the United States of America under Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention, January 3.

Gero, Joan M. and Stephen Loring


Gero, Joan M. and Cristina Scattolin


1995  Household Production as Glue: Insights from the Early Formative of North-West Argentina. Symposium, Reexamining Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to Production and Specialization, 60th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 3 May–7 May.

1997  Consideraciones sobre fechados radiocarbonicos de Yutopian, Catamarca, Argentina. XIIth Congreso Nacional de Arqueología, La Plata, Argentina, September.


1999b  House Chronology at Yutopian, Province of Catamarca, Northwest Argentina. Eighteenth Northeast Conference on Andean Archaeology and Ethnohistory, University of Massachusetts–Amherst, 23–24 October.

Rossen, Jack, Joan M. Gero, and Cristina Scattolin


Scattolin, M. Cristina and Joan M. Gero

About Joan Gero

Anonymous

Díaz-Andreu, Margarita

Enrico

Geller, Pamela
