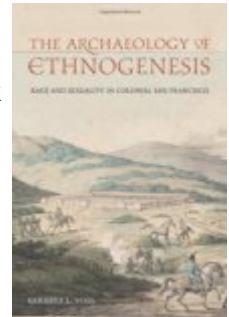


**Barbara L. Voss.** *The Archaeology of Ethnogenesis: Race and Sexuality in Colonial San Francisco*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. Illustrations, maps, tables. xix + 400 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-24492-4.



**Reviewed by** Terrance Weik

**Published on** H-Urban (August, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Robert C. Chidester (The Mannik & Smith Group, Inc.)

*The Archaeology of Ethnogenesis* examines the parts that material culture, cultural practices, and social identity played in the lives of soldiers and indigenous people who lived and worked at El Presidio de San Francisco (1776-1846), a military outpost on the northwestern edge of the Spanish American colonies. Barbara L. Voss explores how people from different continents and ancestries were transformed “from Casta to Californio,” a phrase she borrows from her award-winning journal article.[1] The main argument of the book is that this heterogeneous group of recruits forged a unique collective identity during multigenerational engagements with hierarchical social structures that manipulated racial, status, and gender ideologies. Voss suggests that part of California’s regional identity and heritage originated in the struggles of diverse people of African, indigenous, and Spanish descent who preceded U.S. inhabitants. Unlike investigations of Spanish colonization elsewhere in the Americas, this study of El Presidio de San Francisco suggests that colonists minimized their incorporation of indige-

nous cultural practices (e.g., foodways) and artifacts, such as pottery. A significant documented Native American presence contrasts with the meager material traces of indigenous people—ten artifacts out of over four hundred thousand specimens found at El Presidio.

The book examines the North Beach part of modern San Francisco, where El Presidio operated until it was incorporated into the United States. It became a U.S. military installation from 1846 until 1972, during which time it shifted from a rural to an urban locale. From 1972 until the present, El Presidio has been a part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. In 1994, it became a part of the National Park Service’s holdings. In the wake of these recent historical changes, Voss was able to conduct over thirteen years of research, supported by numerous collaborations between government, academic, public, and non-profit entities. El Presidio has presented archaeologists with special challenges that come with doing urban archaeology. Intensive (re)building episodes affected the level of material culture

preservation. Asphalt covered streets, buildings, and infrastructure have limited archaeologists' access to areas, forcing them to use a variety of fieldwork techniques, from excavation to remote sensing. Archaeology at El Presidio de San Francisco represents one of the most extensive and long-term historical archaeology projects on the West Coast. It is not surprising that El Presidio no longer shapes the built environment or look of contemporary San Francisco. However, Voss argues that El Presidio was an active participant in international networks and politics, which may be the most significant feature that it shares with the global city that engulfed it.

The first part of *Archaeology of Ethnogenesis* establishes the significance of the themes, the theoretical framework, and the historical setting. This sets the stage for part 2, which is composed of chapters devoted to landscape, architecture, ceramics, foodways, and clothing. In chapter 5, the reader is able to assess the scope of the material evidence and the archaeological fieldwork. Many inferences in the archaeological data chapters are drawn from a 200-square-foot sealed midden that partially underlays the clay floor and wall foundations of the east wing of the Presidio quadrangle. Over thirty-seven thousand archaeological specimens were discovered in this midden. The midden artifacts are the main database used to investigate the possessions, architecture, diet, dress, and aesthetics of El Presidio's residents. Archival sources, a second major class of evidence in the work, largely consist of government records, such as officers' reports, clothing allocations, and soldiers' accounts. *Archaeology of Ethnogenesis* contains a range of figures that illustrate Presidio life and fieldwork: photographs of excavation units, the modern setting, artifacts, and castas paintings, as well as drawings of colonial Californian landscapes. Maps depict colonial settlements, political relations, indigenous cultural distributions, and other spatial relations, providing visual reinforcement of textual content. Voss's figures substantiate her arguments and make the book interesting.

Appendices dealing with zooarchaeological and archeobotanical remains provide raw data that illustrate the dominant role of European domesticates in colonial foodways.

*Archaeology of Ethnogenesis* draws on a number of social theories that guide analysis of colonial San Francisco. Gender and sexuality feature prominently in Voss's approach; however, other concepts, such as consumption, social structure, and taste, are also given considerable attention. The spectrum of theories that Voss examines reflect her point that a large number of variables and entities affect how research subjects behave and take form. In other words, phenomena are "overdetermined" (pp. 5, 24). Voss advocates "theoretical pluralism," a position that contradicts the arguments of archaeologists who fear that the lack of an integrated or focused subdisciplinary theoretical discourse threatens the unique contribution and existence of historical archaeology.

This constellation of concepts is integrated in a framework centered on the idea of ethnogenesis. Voss's extensive review of the literature illustrates that ethnogenesis is a theory that has been applied by various governments and intellectuals around the world for over a century. Ethnogenesis has been used to describe ways that new social identities are created, altered, and reproduced. Ethnogenesis theory emphasizes shifts and ongoing transformations of collective identities. Colonialism and state formation have been as much the concern of ethnogenetic theorists as communal initiatives that have fostered solidarity among diverse groups or that have addressed threats to local survival. One omission from an otherwise good assessment of ethnogenesis literature is Mark Hudson's (1999) work on ancient Japan, which built on William C. Sturtevant's (1971) and John H. Moore's (1994) call for explicit attention to regional processes, such as group fission, fusion, aggregation, and destruction.[2]

Two chapters of the book temporalize identity (trans)formations at El Presidio. Chapter 3 charts

the demographic contours of the population at the military post. Voss tabulates the trends in troop strength, household composition, age distribution, and racial ascription. Another table delineates forms of interaction in the area, including colonial conquest, Native American forced labor, battles, Christian conversion, and flight from captivity. One learns of the various forces that created race and gender ideologies, the ways these ideas about human difference were mapped onto the colonized and colonizer, and the instances where domination and social ascription were subverted. A major contribution that Voss makes is to unpack the notion of colonist, and uncouple it from “Spanish soldier,” in ways that challenge popular and scholarly histories of colonial California. This chapter also discerns the complexities, challenges, and agency of colonial women, and the notions shaping their (mis)representation, status, and sexuality (e.g., honor and shame). Gendered domination has been an important part of the region’s colonial history, shaping myths of the time, which, in turn, help to explain how California got its name. Chapter 4 examines similar issues for the late Spanish, Mexican, and early U.S. periods. Voss takes more of a political economic approach to social identity, while also focusing more on such themes as land use and labor. The case is made that archaeological research is an important alternative that can help scholars transcend limitations of document-based research, such as its perpetuation of the male and elite biases of archival sources, its overemphasis on representation versus cultural practices related to Californio identity, its neglect of the period before the 1840s, and its blind spot regarding settings outside of ranchos. The chapter culminates in a diachronic model of Californio ethnogenesis.

The sociocultural dimensions of space and the “sexualization of the Alta California landscape” are concerns in various parts of *Archaeology of Ethnogenesis*, especially chapter 6 (p. 93). In this chapter, the interrelation of land use, spatial dimensions of colonial control and violence, and so-

cial identity are amply illustrated. In places throughout the book, settlements and material assemblages pertaining to settlers and Native Americans in the valley east of the presidio are mentioned. Without spatial data, such as maps, or more formal assemblage comparisons, it is difficult to discern how the mixture of indigenous and colonial material culture translates into modes of social interaction or practices marshalling synthetic suites of material possessions in the immediate vicinity of El Presidio. This kind of information would also help support document-based arguments about the level of colonial dominance or residential segregation, as reflected in the presence, proximity, and destruction of indigenous communities. However, Voss partly addresses this lacuna and problems stemming from the neglect and misrepresentation of women in archival sources by constructing a “landscape biography” of Juana Briones. By examining Briones’s genealogy, occupation, marriage, residences, land ownership, and economic activities, Voss demonstrates the opportunities realized by females and the microscale dynamics that are essential parts of larger narratives about colonial San Francisco.

Local decisions and actions that created the built environment of El Presidio de San Francisco were as influential as regional and global factors. Voss’s examination of architecture illustrates the social production of space, while considering fundamentals of form, production, and style. The architecture of El Presidio exemplifies how its inhabitants conformed to the dictates of male-centric, Spanish, military, Bourbon spatial and aesthetic conventions. El Presidio’s spatial configuration changed to accommodate individual, administrative, and environmental forces. The quadrangle that connected the households of El Presidio grew in size over three major periods of change, and shifted to a more homogenous constellation of building materials and room forms over time. According to Voss, the colonists’ lives were more regulated than physically protected by the Presidio’s less-than-formidable walls, even during lat-

er periods when the walls completely enclosed the residents' living spaces. One reason for the changes and physical vulnerability of El Presidio was the eventual use of adobe as the primary building material, a "colonial folly" in such a damp and rainy area (p. 191). El Presidio's central plaza was much larger than the area within the compartments of the quadrangle superstructure. Archaeologists have been more concerned with the quadrangle architecture than the plaza because of urban conditions which limited the amount of testing that could be done in the plaza. Subsurface data collection had to be done at opportune times when construction projects exposed areas. Although asphalt and cultural resource management priorities have limited the archaeological investigation of the Presidio plaza, Voss still managed to offer possible uses of it: a play area for children, a training ground, a work space, and a place for social performance or ritual. Voss suggests that these activities may have led to an increase in the Presidio quadrangle size over time. While the prehistoric literature that Voss uses is a viable source of analogies for plaza functions, other relevant anthropological literature that are not mentioned, such as Setha M. Low's work on modern and colonial Latin American plazas, could add further support and nuance to discussions of manipulation, performance, and control of public spaces.[3]

Like architecture, El Presidio's residents' dress and sexuality were heavily regulated by Spanish colonial religious and martial disciplines. Voss does not shy away from the challenge of carefully assessing the significance of the tiny proportion of clothing and adornment artifacts found in the settlement. Primary sources indicate that clothing was a reflection of race, gender, status, and religion. At the same time, dress enforced and shaped these ideas. For example, laws prohibited persons who were relegated to lower social statuses from wearing certain types of clothing. Pun-

ishments, such as jail time and lashes, reinforced these edicts.

The ceramic analyses that are described in *Archaeology of Ethnogenesis* explore a spectrum of concerns in the fields of meaning, production, utility, and household life. In this sensible narrative, one sees the shift from colonists' active use and production of natal, regional potting to their increased consumption of local colonial and globalized European pottery. Voss attends to the comparative implications of her work by criticizing associations made between ware types and ethnic, gender, and status groups in Spanish colonial research. She also eschews methods that uncritically employ ware type frequencies as primary modes of data organization and analysis. Voss draws on studies that use specialized techniques, such as Neutron Activation Analysis, to illustrate how El Presidio's pottery was supplied from a similar source (and possibly potter) of raw materials as that of neighboring settlements. Based on the ceramics recovered in midden 13, Voss concludes that table settings at El Presidio were heterogeneous, like the diverse population that used them. European or Euro-American pots dominated tableware, while locally made pottery comprised the majority of serving and storage vessels. According to Voss, the implication of this distribution of pottery sources and functions is that soldiers and their families were fulfilling their role as agents of colonial cultural practice and identity. Ceramic vessel sizes and forms provide evidence for the importance of stews, soups, and gruels at El Presidio. These dishes are potential indicators of labor-saving cooking techniques as well as multiethnic foodways.

As a whole, *Archaeology of Ethnogenesis* is well written, theoretically sophisticated, and unburdened by abstract concepts or hyper-qualified verbiage. Voss lays out straightforward arguments and backs them with standard archaeological data analysis. She demonstrates that new perspectives can be brought to anthropological and his-

torical discourses on colonialism by using archaeology to tease out a variety of aspects concerning El Presidio de San Francisco: the multidimensional character of social identities; the rich use-contexts of mundane possessions; the various scales of political-economic relationships; the ways sexuality and gender affect landscapes and regional processes; and the interrelated ideas and interactions giving form to inequality. Voss has crafted a work that will be accessible by scholars, graduate students, and serious nonacademic readers.

#### Notes

[1]. Barbara L. Voss, "From Casta to California: Social Identity and the Archaeology of Culture Contact," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005): 461-474.

[2]. Mark Hudson, *Ruins of Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Japanese Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999); William C. Sturtevant, "Creek into Seminole," in *North American Indians in Historical Perspective*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock and Nancy Oestreich Lurie (New York: Random House, 1971), 92-128; and John H. Moore, "Ethnogenetic Theory," *National Geographic Research and Exploration* 10, no. 1 (1994): 10-23.

[3]. Setha M. Low, "Cultural Meaning of the Plaza: The History of the Spanish-American Grid-plan-Plaza Urban Design," in *The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space*, ed. Robert Rotenberg and Gary McDonogh (London: Bergin and Garvey, 1993), 75-94.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Terrance Weik. Review of Voss, Barbara L. *The Archaeology of Ethnogenesis: Race and Sexuality in Colonial San Francisco*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15625>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.