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Archaeologies of Ontology

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Abstract

Bruno Latour and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro provided the initial impetus for explicitly ontological research in archaeology. Their impact on archaeologists, however, has been quite different. What I call the “metaphysical archaeologists” trace their genealogy from Latour, though they are now equally influenced by “new materialism” and the “new ontological realism” (Gabriel 2015). They have introduced an alternative metaphysical orthodoxy to archaeology. In contrast, Viveiros de Castro and colleagues have authorized the return of the grand ethnographic analogy to archaeology, particularly in the case of animism. A second, quite different tendency inspired by these same anthropologists is to engage with indigenous ideas as theories to reconfigure archaeological concepts and practice. I suggest that a point of convergence between the metaphysical and the latter anthropological approaches exists in their focus on the concept of alterity.

INTRODUCTION

Ontology as a theory of reality or being exists implicitly in all archaeological practice and theory. Assumptions about exactly what it is provide the ground from which to interpret the world and the past. More self-consciously ontological approaches that marked a shift in archaeological thinking came initially through the work of Bruno Latour (1993, 1999) and subsequently through anthropology via Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2010, 2012). The situation now is that “ontological” in archaeology both covers an increasingly broad range of approaches interested in developing a new metaphysics for archaeology and is also shorthand for studies into a particular domain of culture, one that could be thought of as an extension of ideology or beliefs. Although many of the latter are concerned with ontology, few are what I call “critically ontological.”

Even though it is an open question whether there has been an “ontological turn” in archaeology (or, at least, an “ontological” ontological turn), there has certainly been a strong reorientation toward ontological questions, which represents a shift from an epistemological to an ontological register in theoretical archaeology (Lucas 2012, p. 3). These questions were foreshadowed in phenomenological archaeology (Jones & Alberti 2013, Thomas 2015; see also Watts 2013b); whereas some scholars view ontological questions as a continuation of postprocessualism (Burström 2012, Thomas 2015), others see them as a revolutionary break (Olsen 2012a, Olsen et al. 2012). Importantly, however, this is not the processual versus postprocessual debate about subjective versus objective interpretations. Those are essentially epistemological issues. The “current interpretive dilemma,” as Lucas (2012, p. 25) puts it, is not about whose interpretive apparatus is the correct one, but rather questions archaeology’s underlying metaphysical assumptions [see Wallace (2011) for an uncommon critical realist critique]. Coming on the heels of the “material turn” and “thing theory,” archaeology finds itself in a key position to contribute by bringing a concern with “real” things to contemporary debate (Olsen 2012a; see Pétursdóttir & Olsen 2014).

There is an important distinction between the new archaeological metaphysics and the recent anthropological concern with ontological alterity. The former inscribes a broad arc of change, tracing its genesis through Heidegger and Latour. The latter, influenced by Viveiros de Castro, is indeed an abrupt turn. Both are critically ontological, turning insight back on the archaeological project. Metaphysical archaeologists, however, follow a more conventional trajectory, based on alternatives within the Western intellectual tradition. The approaches are more assimilable for this reason. The ontological anthropology-inspired approach aims to reconfigure archaeology theoretically and conceptually on the basis of indigenous theory (Alberti 2014b, Alberti & Marshall 2009, Fowles 2013). In between is an increasing volume of work interested in ontology but not necessarily critically. In this review, I advocate for a critical ontological approach, which elicits the potential in both the metaphysical and anthropological turns for recognizing ontological difference through archaeology.

“Ontology” often remains undefined in the literature. Its meaning, however, grounds the different approaches to ontology that I describe here, orienting theories, models of reality, terminology, and conceptual apparatus. How different authors use the word reveals a fundamental difference in how it is understood and therefore what its significance is to archaeology. In archaeology, “ontology” is often synonymous either with reality itself, “what there is” (Fowler 2013b, p. 61), or peoples’ claims about reality, “a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is” (Harris & Robb 2012, p. 668). The base difference is this: One can conceptualize ontology either as a people’s “beliefs about” reality or as a people’s reality, their actual ontological commitments. These are quite distinct positions. The former can be assimilated into a cultural or discursive construction argument where baseline “reality” is untouched; the latter requires us to investigate the ground on which we and our theories stand as well.

If “ontology” in conventional philosophical terms was always singular—“a” reality—then the most unsettling move of the “ontological turn” has been to pluralize it. Arguably, this pluralization was a turning point, coming from both the metaphysical archaeologists and those influenced by anthropology. The move is meant to liberate us from the modern Cartesian substance ontology. The shift toward ontology was inspired by Latour’s (1993) critique of the “wholesale conversion of ontological questions into epistemological ones” in *We Have Never Been Modern*. That is, our tradition has been overly concerned with questions of knowledge and less concerned with the nature of what is. The question of ontology was considered either too hard, a metaphysical question that was essentially unanswerable, or self-evident (i.e., it is “Nature”). Latour’s (2005, 2013) response was to multiply both what counts as social and more recently to multiply what he calls the “modes of existence,” ontological tendencies that exist more or less precariously under the assault of modernization. Drawing from Latour, Viveiros de Castro (2003) reveals anthropology’s complicity in this modern project, arguing, as a result, for the conceptual or ontological self-determination of the world’s peoples. The conversion of ontological questions into epistemological ones has made other peoples’ ontological commitments appear trivial or wrong. They are “deontologized.”

The paradox of multiplying ontology lies in the strong sense of possibility in this move coupled with the threat that the formulation levels at ontological approaches as it can engender a fatal misunderstanding. Pluralizing “reality” seems like too much to ask. It would appear to be a form of cultural relativism, encouraging the demotion of the word “ontology” to “culture.” That is, ontology becomes synonymous with cultural beliefs about reality, not reality itself, and we are back to “cultural construction.”

A NEW METAPHYSICS FOR ARCHAEOLOGY

This section focuses on the new metaphysical archaeologists who take a totalizing approach to ontology (Olsen 2010; Olsen et al. 2012; Olsen & Witmore 2015, p. 189). Witmore (in Alberti et al. 2011, p. 897), for example, argues that “[t]o raise the question of ontology is to begin to revisit the question of the way(s) in which—or by which—the world actually exists.” Here I outline the main characteristics of their metaphysics and points of contention. What frames the approaches are the twin concerns of moving beyond the conventional content of “the social” and an interrogation of the fundamental nature of matter. In brief, their metaphysics can be described as anti-Cartesian, relational, and antiontological exceptionalism, such that categories of being or existence are contingent rather than a priori. Olsen’s (2010) *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* is a good example of this approach, as are *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (Olsen et al. 2012) and chapters in *Archaeology After Interpretation* (Alberti et al. 2013). Fowler’s (2013b) *The Emergent Past: A Relational Realist Archaeology of Early Bronze Age Mortuary Practices* is one of the few book-length treatments.

The metaphysical archaeologists have clear antecedents in Heideggerian archaeology (Olsen 2010, Thomas 2015). Although the pluralizing of ontologies goes against this project, some fundamental insights remain. The Heideggerian idea that the world we encounter is preinterpretive guides methods that are still pertinent to the ontological orientation, as well as the idea that archaeological things withdraw from our explicit consciousness (Heidegger 2008; see Olsen 2010, Thomas 1996). Feminist and queer work is also an important antecedent, such as Butler’s (1993) ontological approach to bodies and Strathern’s (1988; see also Grosz 1994) *The Gender of the Gift*, as are the contingent categories of queer theory (Alberti 2012). Haraway (2008) continues to influence the interest in human–Other relations. More recent philosophical input includes Graham

Harman's fusion of Heidegger and Latour and the work of other "speculative realists" and object-oriented ontology theorists (Bryant et al. 2011, Edgeworth 2016, Harman 2009). Furthermore, the critique of "correlationism" (Meillassoux 2008)—the often-implicit idea that humans are a necessary part of all theories of the world—has shifted attention beyond subject relations to "the great outdoors" (Kohn 2015, p. 315).

Given this background, such approaches in archaeology can be described as posthuman, non-representational, and realist. They also share much in common with the new materialism (Alaimo & Hekman 2008, Barad 2007, Coole & Frost 2010, Witmore 2014). Moreover, self-identifying as realist demonstrates that ontological approaches are not simply a rehearsal of social construction arguments; the world is not an object of the human mind (Fowler 2013b, Thomas 2015). Gabriel (2015, p. 10) calls this the "new ontological realism."

From Substance to Relation

Critical ontological approaches are united in their questioning of the ability of modern Cartesian substance ontology—the view that the world is divided into two types of substance, extended matter and thought—to explain the material world fully. The alternative metaphysic is fundamentally relational. Rather than made of discrete objects or pieces of matter, all things are constituted by their relations. However, under the influence of Harman, debate has developed recently about whether relations or objects are primary (see Fowles 2013, Edgeworth 2016, Harman 2016, Witmore 2014). New language attempts to imagine the complex topology of these relational realities, including Latour's (2005) "network," Ingold's (2007, 2012) "meshwork," and Barad's (2007) dough or "entanglement" [as distinct from Hodder (2012)].

Latour's work, especially in the form of ANT (actor–network theory), has been influential in archaeology (see Dolwick 2009; Martin 2013; Olsen 2010, 2012b; Webmoor 2005; Webmoor & Witmore 2008; for critiques, see Hodder 2014, Ingold 2012). His relational ontology stipulates that things exist as a consequence of the strength of their articulations. The stronger your "allies" are, the more reality you can claim. In archaeology, Latour's ideas were taken up especially by the "symmetrical archaeologists," who have applied his ideas less to the isolated context of the past being studied and more to the total project of archaeology (Olsen 2012b, Shanks 2007, Witmore 2007; though see Martin 2013). Ingold (2007, 2013, 2015) has also been hugely influential on archaeologists who are attempting to come to grips with a form of reality that does not correspond to an Aristotelian hylomorphism, the imposition of form onto passive matter by a thinking subject. His metaphysics is akin to a new vitalism in which growth and movement are inherent to the world, not imposed on it (Ingold 2013; see also Bennett 2010, Hodder 2012). Ingold's relationality stresses the commonality of processes across the life/not life divide, in which to make or to grow, for example, can characterize both (Hallam & Ingold 2014). He urges us to focus on materials and not the temporary objects into which they congeal. The notion of processes of becoming, growth, and, more particularly, decay have infused recent archaeological writings (see DeSilvey 2006, Pétursdóttir & Olsen 2014).

Barad's fusion of quantum physics and queer theory is becoming increasingly influential (Alberti & Marshall 2009, Brittain 2013, Fowles 2013, Fowler & Harris 2015, Ingold 2013, Jones 2012, Marshall & Alberti 2014). Her theory of agential realism stipulates a relational world that is in a constant process of becoming. Relations are primary and *relata* are a consequence of relating, the dynamics of which she captures with the term "intra-action." Determinate things, she argues, are the outcome of relations. The concept of phenomenon designates all that is involved in a given set of relationships, such that the outcome of an experiment, for example, would include the influence of the measuring device, the technician, previous results, the setting, etc. At its most radical, her

theory suggests that we must stop thinking about things of any kind, however contingent, as relating to one another: Rather, things emerge in determinate forms from their relating. One important outcome of her theory is the notion that properties are not inherent to things but rather belong to the phenomenon in question, an idea that Marshall & Alberti (2014) explore in relation to the sexing of skeletons and the gendering of objects. From this perspective, sexing bones, for example, involves more than the immediate measuring devices, but also “the person measuring the skeletons, the environmental laboratory conditions, the economic and political practices that impinge on the lab, the norms encoded in the reference tables of measurements, and so on” (Marshall & Alberti 2014, p. 27). The outcome is both the normative category “sex” and the assignment of a given bone to that category. Sex is not part of or “in” the bone because the bone is only one part of the phenomenon which “produces a determination of sex” (Marshall & Alberti 2014, p. 28). Drawing from Deleuze, Conneller (2011, p. 125) makes a similar argument in the case of the emergent properties of materials through the mediation of technologies in the European Paleolithic and Mesolithic, such that the technology at hand and the types of practices that prehistoric peoples engaged in produced both specific knowledge and specific properties of materials. She concludes that “[t]racing the processes by which the properties of past materials emerge reveals configurations of past worlds.”

The redeployed term “assemblage” covers similar ground to Barad’s phenomenon in attempting to mobilize important elements of relational and realist ontologies (Jones & Alberti 2013; see Deleuze & Guattari 1988). Assemblage replaces context because it connotes openness rather than closure, an image of dynamic extension (Fowler 2013a, p. 252). Assemblage has also been used as a model for past societies and change (Jones & Sibbesson 2013). For example, Harris (2013) adopts DeLanda’s influential reading of assemblage to describe how humans and nonhumans produced communities that changed in composition and through time in Neolithic and Bronze Age Britain, as well as in how such assemblages are predicated on the past communities and the relation between archaeologist and material remains. Assemblage continues to be used as a principle underlying the constitution of the archaeological record, superseding that of the linguistic model of context (Conneller 2011; Jones & Alberti 2013; Laguens 2013; Lucas 2012, 2013; Y. Hamilakis, unpublished manuscript). Lucas (2012, pp. 193–214), for example, reconfigures conventional archaeological notions of assemblages as depositional and typological such that the dynamism and flux of archaeological entities is captured. In one of the few book-length case studies of the new approaches, Fowler (2013a,b) deploys the concept of the assemblage as a “relational realist” tool that gathers together all the conventional elements of the archaeological project. As such, he describes his project as “engaging with the assemblage ‘Early Bronze Age mortuary practices in Northeast England’” (Fowler 2013a, p. 253).

Contingent Categories

Another characteristic of the new ontological realism is its recognition of contingent categories of being or existence. The conventional archaeological ontology, up to phenomenology, posited an ontological distinction between things and society, as well as between animals, humans, and world (Jones 2012; Watts 2013b, p. 10). “Open ontology” captures the idea that phenomena and assemblages are temporary, contingent, and unbounded (Fowler 2013a, p. 257). This concept is closely aligned with a critique of human exceptionalism and the removal of an ontologically privileged status from any particular being—a form of “ontological humility” (Thomas 2015). Latour’s (2005) notion of symmetry challenged these ontological divisions through his parliament of things in which membership is conferred by dint of impact on other things rather than belonging to a self-evident category of being, such as a human. The principle of symmetry is a provisional

guideline (Olsen & Witmore 2015, p. 192). As such, symmetrical archaeology is an example of a “flat ontology, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status” (DeLanda 2004, p. 58; see Witmore 2014)—flat but not undifferentiated. The notion of symmetry helps to get at differences without determining what they are in advance. Under this view, archaeological “types” or “objects” are simply reified sets of relations. Nonetheless, archaeologists must work with typologies within this understanding (Fowler 2013a, p. 251) or establish alternative “taxonomies of being” (Zedeño 2013, p. 118).

The status of the human in such accounts has provoked tension. Are humans a contingent category too? For some, there must be something fundamentally important about the distinction—philosophically, empirically, archaeologically, and ethically—and for others, establishing any a priori fundamental distinction is a mistake (Witmore 2014). However, posthumanism, some argue, is not about a disinterest in people but simply changes the focus (Olsen 2012a, p. 29). Olsen (2012a) signals a major shift under way from the Latourian critique of categories to beyond human correlationism. This move ultimately requires us to consider how things relate to each other without humans and in a nonmechanical way (Hodder 2012, 2016; Olsen 2012a). Even in Latour, things are still discussed in relation to human qualities (Harman 2009; Pétursdóttir & Olsen 2014, p. 24), which leaves little room for “thingly qualities” such as “passivity and silence, fragmentation and decay.” Barad (2007) argues that “ontological determinacy” is achieved when one part of the world “interprets” another, in much the same way that “[a] rill of water interprets a wall” (Witmore 2014, p. 218). The language is a little shocking, though it retains an inevitable anthropomorphism. In archaeology, the volume *Ruin Memories* (Olsen & Pétursdóttir 2014) exemplifies what the editors call a “ruining” metaphysics, in which things act on themselves, by arguing that, for example, “the wall holds a special kind of involuntary memory” (Olsen 2010, p. 170) in which things are left open to make their own meanings. Ingold’s (2007, 2015) work on materials is closely aligned to this general approach. Furthermore, in anthropology, Holbraad (2014) has explored whether things or materials can be the source of their own conceptualization.

Relativism

Pluralizing ontology brings with it charges of relativism, as objective knowledge seems at odds with contingent foundations. Ontology as beliefs about reality simply side steps the issue by returning to representationalism. Arguably, however, ontological realism signals the commitment to a strong version of truth and objectivity. The relational realist approaches challenge the correspondence theory of truth: They are nonrepresentational in the sense that they do not hold to a division between a world of ideas and a world of things in which the ideas must correspond to a truth demonstrable in the world of things. Influenced by nonrepresentational approaches, archaeologists are searching for access to materials that does not rely exclusively on the interpreting act of a knowing subject (Anderson & Harrison 2010, Jones & Alberti 2013, Vannini 2015). The move is away from “over interpretation” and abstractions (Olsen 2012a, p. 22; Lucas 2012).

Truth and objectivity do, however, exist. We can still say things about the past with great certainty. Lucas (2012) calls this a process of materialization, though not the materialization of ideas, as commonly understood. In his account “qualities already inherent in matter itself but not actualized” (Lucas 2012, p. 167) are materialized, not abstract beliefs and ideas. Latour’s notion of truth, as any claim or actant who has strong allies, is echoed by Fowler (2013a, p. 257), who argues that “archaeology operates by seeking strong and effective articulations between different elements of the world,” including theories, apparatuses, and material remains. Barad uses the example of the wave-particle duality paradox to demonstrate that multiple, objective truths can exist. This is “the perplexing fact that light and matter exhibit both wave and particle behaviours,” properties

conventionally considered mutually exclusive (Barad 2007, p. 123). According to Barad, there is no paradox because the specific physical properties of the apparatus used to measure matter (an electron) produce the specific properties of the electron within that phenomenon. Fowler & Harris (2015) demonstrate the principle archaeologically in the case of the Neolithic chambered tomb of West Kennet, showing how it can move between existing as a set of shifting relations and as a specific thing. Marshall & Alberti (2014) adapt Barad's ideas to argue that the categories of both sex and gender come about through the repetition of set material practices, each equally real. In summary, being neither naturalism nor constructivism, ontological realism claims that objectivity and truth may be contingent but are nonetheless demonstrable and robust.

The Archaeological Past and Temporality

Ontological approaches, not without contention, tend to stress that archaeologists work on “material pasts in the present” (Olsen et al. 2012, p. 1; Witmore 2014; though see Fowler 2013a,b). Just as multiple ontologies exist, so do multiple temporalities. The material record is, according to Olsen, an expression of how the “past actually gathers in the present” (Olsen 2010, p. 26) rather than being fragmentary evidence of history. Bergson is a strong influence (Hamilakis 2013, Lucas 2012, Olsen 2010). Hamilakis (2013) illustrates this new ontology of time, arguing, on the basis of the sensorial affordances of matter, for multiple coexisting times and for matter as multitemporal. Materials are given certain autonomy through the notion of “residue” (Lucas 2012) or the idea of memory objects, material entities in which “the memory of a moment in time is recorded” (Olivier 2011, p. 132). They record physical memories, according to Olivier (2011, p. 132), because of their “temporary sensitivity.” They can accumulate inscriptions of events as well as the gaps—periods of insensitivity—that separate them. As such, Olivier (2011, p. 34) argues that we should not define the past but rather determine “what the past in itself can tell us.” Fowler (2013a, pp. 242–45), drawing on his concept of the extended assemblage, argues, however, that it is precisely the past that endures in the assemblage. We are involved in studying a past that is, however, continuously unfolding and thus changing.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SOCIAL ONTOLOGIES

By “the archaeology of social ontologies” I mean approaches that incorporate some elements of an ontological approach and apply these to their interpretive endeavors rather than undertake a complete metaphysical overhaul of the discipline. These uses are characterized by an extension of the meaning of the social; reconstruction of past ontologies; and the use of anthropological case material as an analogical tool or relational ally. Such work is additive rather than reconstructive, including ontology as a new interpretive tool, and as such can be seen as a continuation of social archaeology.

Arguably, Alberti & Bray (2009) inaugurated this approach in a special edition of the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. Watt's (2013a) edited volume *Relational Archaeologies* is an important continuation, as well as some chapters in *Archaeology After Interpretation* (Alberti et al. 2013). Social ontology approaches utilize recent ontological theory and ethnographic writings to more faithfully reconstruct the ontologies of past societies. To this end, they extensively use anthropological accounts of others' ontologies. The modern substance ontology, it is argued, has obscured other peoples' ontologies, which may take quite different forms, but are often conceived of as “relational” (Alberti & Bray 2009). Overcoming modern dualisms, long a concern of archaeological theory, is stressed with a particular focus on mind/matter and nature/culture (Alberti & Bray 2009; Gosden & Garrow 2012, p. 24). “Counter-modern ontologies”—whether non-Western or

alternatives from within the West—are explored to see “how such relational ways of life crystalize in the archaeological record” (Watts 2013b, p. 13; see also Brown & Walker 2008).

Archaeologies of the body have been prominent in the ontological literature, which is not surprising given ontological archaeology’s background in feminism, queer, and phenomenological approaches. Studies of bodies include, for example, the examination of ontological equivalence of bodies and pots in anthropomorphic ceramics from northwest Argentina (Alberti 2014b); the temporary congealing of unstable, fluid bodies among the Linearbandkeramik culture of central Europe (Hofmann 2013); and the coexistence of overlapping and contemporary ontologies of the body in European prehistory (see contributors to Robb & Harris 2015). Harris & Robb (2012) argue for a culturally universal multimodal ontology of the body on the basis of evidence demonstrating that ontologies of bodies in Europe have changed through time but that overlapping and apparently contradictory ontologies can be lived simultaneously (see also Mol 2002 for an example from science and technology studies). The general ontological body-mind-environment relationship has been explored by Gosden (2008), who has investigated neurological and corporal development through interaction with, for example, Iron Age swords. Similarly, Malafouris (2013) has collapsed the ontological separation of body, mind, and world, arguing for the importance of environment and objects in the origins and development of self-awareness and cognition. Hamilakis (2013) has shown how a focus on the ontology of the senses can provide a way to theorize the transcorporeal “fields of sensoriality” that refuse the boundedness of isolated bodies and things. Work on skill and making finds an ontological resonance, too, whether challenging the ontological division of making and growing (Alberti 2014b, Hallam & Ingold 2014) or the coconstitution of maker and object (Budden & Sofaer 2009, Ingold 2013, Malafouris 2013).

One outcome of the fusing of contemporary ontological concerns with relational anthropology is an extended sociality that includes animals, spirits, and things. For example, the influence of the “animal turn” is being felt in archaeology (Harris & Hamilakis 2014, Hill 2013, Oma & Birke 2013). Nonanthropocentric zoological studies and the cobecoming of humans and animals are important areas of research. Influences include Haraway’s (2008) ontological explorations of the human–animal “becoming together” in her notion of the companion species, Deleuze’s (Deleuze & Guattari 1988) concept of “animal-becoming,” and anthropologist Willerslev’s (2007) explorations of the intersubjective relationship between hunter and prey.

The hunting relationship has also generated a number of thought-provoking explanations of archaeological phenomena from material remains to artworks. For example, Losey et al. (2013) argue for the ontological equivalence of bears and humans at Shamanka II, a Siberian hunter-gatherer cemetery [see also Overton & Hamilakis (2013) on swan persons in the Danish Mesolithic], and Weismantel (2013, 2015) and Borić (2013) draw on Willerslev and Viveiros de Castro in their phenomenological explorations of animal representations at Chavín de Huantar and Göbekli Tepe, respectively. Similarly, Harris & Hamilakis (2014) relativize the concepts of wild/domestic/feral through an exploration of human–animal relations in Minoan Crete.

Such ethnographic materials provide alternatives to our modern substance ontology, especially examples drawn from the Americas. Bray (2009, 2012) investigates native Andean ritual commensality to understand what kinds of beings existed within the social universe of pre-Columbian Andean peoples—different ontological premises meant that all material things were potential agents. Andean wak’as, often a feature of the natural landscape but also a subject, are a case in point (Bray 2009, 2015). In North America, Native American ontologies have provided purchase on the interpretation of prehistoric rock art sites (Creese 2011, Robinson 2013). It is the Amazon, however, that has proved the most decisive in terms of influence on the ontological approaches in archaeology, principally through a renovated concept of “animism” (Alberti & Bray 2009). Animism, more than any other anthropological material, has provided models of relationality

for archaeologists to interpret material patterning in the archaeological record, becoming an ethnographic meta-analogy for past ontologies. Animism blurs the relationship between nature and culture; animists are said to develop relationships with other-than-human agencies, such as animals, spirits, and even artifacts (Gosden & Garrow 2012, p. 24). Investigations of personhood in archaeology set the stage for the “new animism” (Fowler 2004, Robinson 2013). For example, Wilkinson’s (2013) ontological alternative to personhood in the body of the Inka emperor directly engages with this literature. Viveiros de Castro’s (2010, 2012) theory of perspectivism (see below) in particular has provided the ethnographic models that archaeologists apply in their reconstructions of past ontologies. For example, Betts et al. (2012) apply the concept of perspectivism to interpret human–shark relationships in Late Archaic to Late Woodland maritime mortuary contexts. Sharks, they suggest, were considered conspecifics of humans, and sharks teeth were used to gain some of the shark’s abilities. Conneller (2004) draws on Deleuze and Viveiros de Castro to make a similar but more nuanced interpretation of antlers from Mesolithic Star Carr. Thus, perspectivism has become a general model applied to many contexts (Weismantel 2015).

Even though animism is an important part of ontological archaeology, it does not constitute a critical ontological archaeology. This work aims to reconstruct past ontologies analogously to the reconstruction of past culture. As such, it satisfies our historical curiosities about how other people might have lived quite different lives, building toward a taxonomy of past ontologies. It does not, however, lead to ontological critique. It is telling that Viveiros de Castro’s (2003, 2010) goal—to systemize Amerindian thought into a metaphysics such that it can have a reciprocal effect on anthropological thought and “naturalist” or Western metaphysics—is rarely cited. Thus, much social ontology and new animist archaeology omit the critical stance of Viveiros de Castro’s work.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ALTERITY AND INDIGENOUS THEORY

The notion of multiple ontologies may have precipitated the outpouring of work on alternative ontologies, but it also produced its own crisis: How do people communicate across different “hermetically sealed” ontologies (Harris & Robb 2012)? Arguably, the question arises because such approaches draw their analogies from others’ beliefs about reality but do not see these as challenges to the nature of material reality per se. In this formation, “world”—in its fully conceptual-material sense—struggles to become anything other than the single world of science. Reference to a “common world” (Alberti et al. 2011, Harris & Robb 2012) defers social construction rather than moves beyond it, as the “really real” is passed to the next level of representation. Through this process of deferral, ontology becomes just another name for culture (Kohn 2015, Venkatesan et al. 2010).

In an important way, then, the new animism leaves unaddressed the most interesting anthropological ontological questions. Similarly, the metaphysical archaeologists tend to steadfastly ignore anthropology (Olsen 2010). But the painstaking work of developing new archaeological metaphysics on the basis of an alternative Western intellectual tradition brings us no closer to grappling with the ontological difference presented to us anthropologically. In this section, I outline both the anthropological project that considers ontology as a critical question productive of conceptual engagement and the work of archaeologists who, influenced often by Viveiros de Castro, Holbraad, and the volume *Thinking Through Things* (Henare et al. 2007b), theorize and practice archaeology on the basis of indigenous theories. In essence, where new animists turn to animism for a source of analogies, critical ontology turns to animism for a source of theory.

As Viveiros de Castro’s (2003) work has argued, the effect of the conversion of ontological questions into epistemological ones has made other peoples’ claims about reality and their ontological commitments appear trivial or wrong. The metatheorization of Amazonian animism has resulted

in the theory of Amazonian perspectivism, which posits a “multinatural” metaphysics that inverts the culture–nature relation, replacing our multiple cultures and singular nature with multiple natures (worlds) and a singular culture (way of knowing those worlds). Viveiros de Castro has described his theory of perspectivism as a theoretical bomb, designed to explode Western thought by challenging basic Western intellectual assumptions and anthropological concepts (Latour 2009).

It is perspectivism as theory, therefore, that should travel to archaeology and not analogies based on the ethnographic content (Alberti 2014b, Alberti & Marshall 2009, Cabral 2015). For example, I have used the meta-theoretical claims of perspectivism in relation to bodies to reconsider the concept of scale in relation to physically miniature ceramics from northwest Argentina (Alberti 2013). In perspectivist accounts, the human body is not limited to one size. Spirits, for example, are experienced as diminutive yet brilliantly decorated or huge and grotesque. In the case of the ceramics, I argued that size was not the measure of scale but rather the intensity of decoration was: The more intense or grotesque the body was, the more “body” it was. Other archaeologists are engaging with indigenous concepts and practices in similar ways. Working from commonality rather than alterity, Fowles (2013) advocates that archaeologists engage with Vine Deloria’s critique of anthropology and his American Indian metaphysics. Fowles (2013) develops the concept of “doings” with which he replaces the category of religion in Puebloan archaeology. Green & Green (2013) show how working with indigenous communities can lead to engagement with conceptual alterity through a public archaeology project among the Palikur in Amapá State, Brazil. The result is an archaeology defined as “reading the tracks of the ancestors” (Green & Green 2013, p. 8). Similarly, Haber (2009, 2013) uses the Andean concept of “*uywaña*” (nurture) to reconceptualize both archaeological practice and interpretation. Marshall (Marshall & Alberti 2014) has worked with the Maori things/concepts of *fukapapa* and *taonga*. When described as *taonga*, something is both covering talk and physical entity; as such, archaeological categories can capture only part of what is significant about an object.

Archaeologists were attracted to *Thinking Through Things* (Henare et al. 2007b) because of the promise that we could “take seriously” apparently inexplicable cases of indigenous belief. Henare et al. (2007a) presented the idea of the “thing” concept: a nonspecified ontological category that can be “filled” through ethnographic observation that is designed to allow ontological alterity to inform its content. Holbraad (2007, 2012) provides the example of “powder-power,” a substance used in Cuban Ifá divining ceremonies, which according to observation is neither strictly idea nor strictly physical matter, but both. Holbraad’s project, though closely aligned to Viveiros de Castro, is about the power of these cases of alterity to generate new concepts rather than about the development of a new metaphysic (Alberti et al. 2011, though see Kohn 2015). Holbraad (2012, pp. 46–47) calls this a “recursive anthropology,” describing recursivity as the willingness to allow our concepts to be transformed in relation to indigenous ones. Alterity is understood here as “a function of the divergence between ethnographic materials and the assumptions the analyst brings to them” (Holbraad 2012, p. 54). If ontology is what “is,” then alterity is the part of what others say what “is” that does not make sense to us. The tension—divergence—is the productive center of the recursive method. In archaeology, I have attempted to understand anthropomorphic ceramic pots from northwest Argentina as “body-pots,” refusing the separation of ceramic object from fleshly organism, in an attempt to free potential alterity from the overdetermination of representational thought (Alberti 2014b).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ALTERITY AND A NEW KIND OF REFLEXIVITY

The crucial question in critical ontological archaeology, I would argue, is how to reconcile the new metaphysical approaches with the quite different—incommensurable, even—ontologies at work

among non-Western and premodern peoples. The danger is that a new metaontological orthodoxy may become an “immutable metaphysic” (Alberti et al. 2011, p. 906), impervious to the words and deeds of small-scale societies, whose own metaphysics are often presented in a complex narrative form that, notwithstanding the work of anthropologists and indigenous intellectuals (Deloria 2003, Kopenawa & Albert 2013), continues to seem quaint and inaccessible to systematization. Metaphysical archaeologists resist adopting ideas from social anthropology (Olsen 2010): They maintain that archaeology should be archaeological rather than draw its alterity from elsewhere. There is a point of convergence, however. What unites anthropology and archaeology is the recognition that alterity or Otherness exists in things. Archaeological alterity can be understood as things that do not make sense ontologically, things that escape traditional frameworks. The popularity among metaphysical archaeologists of Harman’s (2009) claim that something of a thing remains withdrawn, beyond all relations, and the idea of “memory objects” (Olivier 2011), can be understood in this light (though see Fowler 2013a, p. 242). It becomes archaeologists’ responsibility to get at that Otherness, “the archaeological difference” (Pétursdóttir 2014, p. 336) held in things.

As such, among ontologically oriented archaeologists a “new kind of reflexivity” is evident (Fowler 2013b), which is characterized by openness or wonder, by an emphasis on the descriptive rather than the theoretical, and by attentiveness to our embodied responses. The question for the critical ontology project in archaeology could be, “How are we to mobilize and manifest” the new pasts from things? (Witmore 2014, p. 219). This is an ontological question because not only are we subjectively involved in the pasts we investigate, as postprocessualism recognized, but we are objectively part of those pasts too (Fowler 2013a, p. 236; Jones & Alberti 2013; Pétursdóttir 2014); thus archaeology “describes and transforms what there really is in the world” (Fowler 2013a, p. 236). In fact, a concern with methods distinguishes the critical ontology project—archaeologists who understand their project to be ontological to its roots—from the social ontologists, who apply ontological models rather than open themselves to the effects of other ontologies or the alterity in materials.

Wonder or a kind of intentional naïveté or naïve empiricism in the face of what is studied is meant to sustain the alterity while enabling meaning or some kind of understanding to take place (Pétursdóttir & Olsen 2014, Scott 2014, Stengers 2011). Drawing on Walter Benjamin in particular, Olivier (2011) recognizes the strangeness, or uncanny, that we experience in the presence of archaeological things—it is what we fail to grasp in our representations. “Ruin archaeologists” recognize that ontological alterity is not a thing of only the distant past (Olsen & Pétursdóttir 2014). Pétursdóttir (2014, pp. 336–37; see also Hamilakis 2013) argues that such a stance of openness to Otherness or wonder is essential in order that the nondiscursivity of things—ruins, archaeological things that surprise us—can affect us, resisting the more or less instantaneous move to lose that Otherness within an analytical or interpretive scheme to make it familiar. The author’s goal is to “remain besieged by and committed to” the strangeness of things, rather than to move beyond it through “purification, contextualization, or interpretation,” what she calls a “humble and attentive ontology” (Pétursdóttir 2014, p. 346), a clear echo of the anthropological method of Henare et al. (2007a).

“Thick, careful description” (Fowler 2013a, pp. 256–57; Pétursdóttir & Olsen 2014; Thomas 2015; Witmore 2014, p. 221) of things—or “following the materials,” in Ingold’s (2007) felicitous phrase—marks an important distinction between anthropology and archaeology. Archaeologists are highly sensitized to materials and things, as their work starts from among them (Olsen et al. 2012), whereas materials have escaped the ontological critique in anthropology, their alterity largely unrecognized (Alberti 2014a). Ontological archaeologists recognize that things have a say in how meanings are arrived at (Edgeworth 2012; Olsen 2010, 2012a). The descriptive turn is also

a response to the dangers of overinterpretation, of fitting things into pre-established frameworks. Archaeologists need to become more descriptive again, it is argued, to bring out parts of the archaeological reality left out of ordinary reports (Olsen 2012a, p. 27). C. Witmore (unpublished manuscript) calls this method chorography, after the all-encompassing descriptive writings of ancient and antiquarian travelers in which all elements of the scene were included, therefore avoiding the proscriptions of linear history. What is encountered imposes itself, forcing a choice and a description.

This form of reflexivity is closely aligned with kinetic activity and the experience of being in the field (Edgeworth 2012, Witmore 2014), where we can be sensually overwhelmed when confronted with the strange (Pétursdóttir 2012, 2014). Similarly, Ingold (2014, p. 234) argues that we need to “walk through and with” our materials, like hunters follow the tracks of animals (see also Green & Green 2013). Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014, p. 24) give this archaeological method a distinct embodied element, calling it a method of “aesthetic attentiveness,” a form of “cognitive and sensual openness.” Hamilakis (2013, p. 4) argues for a return to archaeologies of “multi-sensorial, experiential modes of engaging with the world.” This method is akin to the effect that art can have too, or what Kohn (2015, p. 313) refers to as being “made over” ontologically by an artistic project that is not metaphysical, but rather is designed to impact us, a form of “ontological poetics.” Anthropological and archaeological approaches are allies in these goals insofar as alterity or Otherness is the productive spark; indigenous theory and engagement with indigenous thinkers are important elements in this project to avoid an overgeneralized, embodied account of the wonder of materials.

CONCLUSION: CRITICALLY ONTOLOGICAL

The deployment of the word “ontology” in archaeology is, in certain senses, pragmatic; it flags a particular domain of interest and signals the potential world-shifting nature of what is being studied (see Alberti & Marshall 2009). Its uncritical application to archaeological materials may, however, obscure other important reasons—concerning political organization or ritual practices, say—for radical changes in materialities (Swenson 2015). One suspects, however, that these are not mutually exclusive domains. Here it is worth repeating that ontological approaches are not relativistic; a position on reality is adopted by both metaphysical archaeologists (Fowler 2013b) and ontological anthropologists (Holbraad 2012). To be ontological does imply, however, that the entirety of the analytical apparatus and what is being studied should be included in the analysis. The litmus test of whether an approach is critically ontological as opposed to mundanely ontological is whether both what is being studied and the analytical scaffolding, methods, and analyst themselves are caught up in the process. That is, the difference between the two lies in the degree to which an approach is willing to do ontology to itself, how much critique it is willing to direct at its own ontological assumptions. I have elsewhere called this “radical procedural equivalence” (Alberti & Marshall 2009, Jones & Alberti 2013). In fact, some see a new kind of discipline as the outcome of new practices of caring for things (Olsen et al. 2012) or an “onto-genetics” in which the question “What is archaeology?” comes to the fore, including a turn toward nonmodern archaeologies of both Western and non-Western origin (Hamilakis 2011). The social ontology approaches are not necessarily ontological in this immersive way; they are more akin to archaeologies of other peoples’ ontologies than a critically ontological archaeology.

There is good reason to cast our archaeological objects as withdrawn, taciturn, or reticent, whether it is a metaphysically sound claim or not. If you assign things to a preexisting conceptual structure or an interpretive model, then you necessarily do not “have” the past. If you look for ways that they can have an impact on your thinking, concepts, and ontology, then you are necessarily

unlocking what is most “of the past” about things. A great challenge for archaeology will be to work with our material in such a way that maximizes the potential for ontological difference to emerge. According to Pétursdóttir & Olsen (2014, p. 14; see also Olsen et al. 2012, Witmore 2014), this is the reason for an ethics of caring for objects and the past, taking their Otherness seriously. A goal of the new metaphysics is to better understand relations among nonhumans that will allow us to face contemporary and archaeological challenges (Olsen & Witmore 2015, p. 189), just as Kohn (2015) argues that the ontological turn in anthropology is about developing the tools to confront the contemporary ecological crisis. Caring for things (Olsen et al. 2012) is about respecting their alterity. Could archaeology thus be a partner in the antimodernizing projects that defend a “plurality of modes of being” (Kohn 2015, p. 322)?

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