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The Past is Tomorrow. Towards an Archaeology of the Vanishing Present

ALFREDO GONZÁLEZ-RUIBAL

This paper arises from a dissatisfaction with the ‘Great Divides’ created between past and present, self and others, people and material culture in the context of ethnoarchaeology. While conducting ethnoarchaeological research in Spain, Ethiopia and Brazil, I have been faced with the theoretical and practical shortcomings of this field, which is too deeply rooted in modernist concerns and prejudices. I propose a reconsideration of ethnoarchaeology as archaeology *tout court* – an archaeology of the present – which has to be symmetrical in character. This means that present and past must not be hierarchically conceived – the former in the service of the latter or vice versa – nor strictly separated ontologically, and the relations between humans and things have to be properly problematized.

INTRODUCTION

There is a discomfort among many archaeologists today for the discipline’s movement away from things, a movement that exacerbates many of the problems associated with Cartesian dualisms. Against this prevailing asymmetry between things and humans, present and past, cultures and natures, some authors are proposing now a symmetrical way of reasoning and acting (Olsen 2003, 2006, Shanks 2005, Witmore 2004, in press, Webmoor 2005), which implies, among other things, that people and things are constructed simultaneously (Latour 1993, 2005:76), not as separated entities¹, and that past and present are actually mixed.

Ethnoarchaeology is the study of living, non-industrial societies with the aim of generating archaeological analogies or ‘food for the archaeological imagination’ (David & Kramer 2001). Despite important criticisms and reappraisals (Hodder 1991:107–120, Lane 1996, 2006, David & Kramer 2001)

this sub-field of archaeology is still the quintessential asymmetrical science. It is founded on an absolute distinction between past and present, nature and culture, moderns and premoderns, things and people. Ethnoarchaeology is done in the present to understand the past, is done by moderns among premoderns and it works with things-in-themselves to counterbalance the anthropologists’ focus on people-in-themselves. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to depict ethnoarchaeology as a homogeneous field. Within the sub-discipline, as in archaeology in general, there are many different theories and practices: the ethnoarchaeology that most strongly reinforces the Cartesian divides and the alienation of the Other is that practiced by processual archaeologists (e.g. Longacre & Skibo 1994) and, especially, bioarchaeologists working within the sociobiological paradigm – a good example is Hawkes *et al.* (1997). Some ethnoarchaeologists, such as Nicholas David (David &

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Kramer 2001) or Paul Lane (2005, 2006), carry out a much more reflexive and historically-grounded practice – first advocated by Ian Hodder (1991). However, the most compelling work on the material culture of traditional societies usually comes from people who were not trained as archaeologists but as anthropologists, such as Pierre Lemonnier (1992) or Paul Sillitoe (1998) – a matter to reflect upon. Anyway, the problems outlined above (the acceptance and even reinforcement of Cartesian divides) are shared by the discipline as a whole.

Despite the (meta)theoretical shortcomings inherent to the subdiscipline, I want to suggest in this article that ethnoarchaeology, understood as a different way of dealing with people, things and time, can be fundamental in supporting a symmetrical project. The first symmetrical question that comes to mind is: why go to work with a group of swidden cultivators in the Ethiopian lowlands or a band of hunter-gatherers in the Amazon forest instead of studying ourselves – scholars, industrial workers, lawyers or software engineers? After all, ‘we have never been modern’ (Latour 1993). This is a thorny question, both from an epistemological and ethical point of view (Gosden 1999:9, 2004:100). My provisional answer is that we need to work among non-industrial societies because there are lessons that we can learn there that we will not receive anywhere else. After all, most non-capitalist societies have never established those great (modernist) divides, which we are trying so desperately to get rid of, after three centuries of Cartesianism (Thomas 2004).

Here I deal briefly with two of these great divides that a symmetrical (ethno)archaeology can help to bypass altogether: the dichotomy past/present and the duality between the material and the immaterial.

PRESENT/PAST

Conventionally, when an ethnoarchaeologist enters a village of swidden cultivators – let’s

say a Gumuz settlement, in western Ethiopia – he or she witnesses a living culture, a culture of the present, whose technologies are comparable, however, to those of prehistoric times; more specifically, from a time we could call the Neolithic or the Bronze Age. Thus, he or she can study Gumuz houses or pots or agriculture. The ethnoarchaeologist may note the richness of ephemeral materials such as basketry, dress, gourds, etc. in the present and apply the acquired knowledge to similar cultures in the remote past. By so doing, the ethnoarchaeologist displaces his or her object of study to another, more primitive time, and imagines a radical Other in an even more obvious and dramatic way than anthropology (Fabian 1983). In other words, they elicit the construction of the Other twice over. An Other in the present is a means to envisioning an Other in the past. This procedure started with the very beginning of the scientific discipline of prehistory: the works of J. Lubbock (1865) and N. Joly (1879), the former in Britain and the latter in France, include both prehistoric and present artefacts in their accounts of ‘primitive men’ (Fig. 1).

However, when we enter a Gumuz village in western Ethiopia we enter a complex mixture of various times, more or less the same as when we walk about a town in Europe or the United States. The Roman writer Cicero put it beautifully two thousand years ago: ‘wherever we go, we step on another history’ (Cicero *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 5, 5). We see, touch and walk around technologies, things, spaces that are eight thousand years old. We encounter things that have existed for several centuries (an adze) and others that were invented only some decades ago (plastic beads). We see 20th century artefacts that look immensely archaic – a broken plastic bucket smeared with grease and filled with sorghum paste – and, likewise, we see millennia-old technologies that are brand new – a hand-made pot drying under the sun, before firing (Fig. 2). As ethnoarchaeologists, which of these

comme les cornes d'*urus* ornementées, chez les Germains du temps de César. Mais, en comparant ces prétendus trophées ou

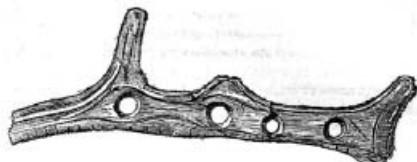


Fig. 100. — Bâton de commandement à quatre trous.

marques de distinction avec le *pack-a-mogan* (voy. fig. 101), massue des Indiens du Canada, nous sommes tenté d'en faire des armes de chasse ou de combat. De même que les sceptres du Périgord, le *pack-a-mogan* ou *pogamagan* des Indiens de la rivière de

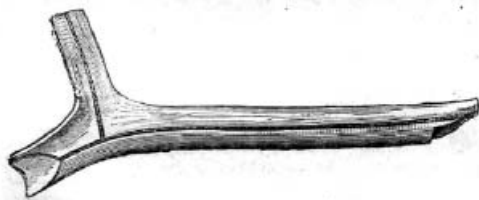


Fig. 101. — Le pogamagan des Esquimaux, réduit au $\frac{1}{4}$ (d'après Beccu).

Mackensie est fait avec un bois de renne, dont on a préalablement enlevé tous les andouillers, sauf celui de l'extrémité inférieure ou premier andouiller.

Pigorini a récemment émis l'idée que les soi-disant bâtons de commandement ont aujourd'hui pour analogue l'une des pièces en bois de cerf dont les habitants de la Sardaigne se servent habituellement pour confectionner les chevêtres de leur attelage (fig. 102). Mais, après avoir lu attentivement la description qu'il donne et les arguments qu'il invoque en faveur de son opinion, je ne suis pas encore convaincu au point de la partager.

Au nombre des armes de jet figurent les pierres de fronde, employées à la chasse et à la guerre depuis l'âge archéolithique le plus

Fig. 1. Bone weapons – Palaeolithic and 19th century 'Skimo'. After Joly (1879).

presents will we apply to the past? Should we sort out the Neolithic in Gumuz culture? How do we accomplish this without violence, without breaking the essential conflation of multiple times and things that is characteristic of any human society, which symmetrically we understand as a collective of people, things and companion species? Untangling such complex mixtures simply leads us further away from reality.

Instead of following that path (focusing on what is, for example, 'pure prehistoric'), I think that ethnoarchaeology can make a real contribution to archaeology as a whole by addressing the multiplicity of times in the cultures it studies. However, in so doing, ethnoarchaeology has, in the first place, to



Fig. 2. A Gumuz potter finishing a large vessel in Maataba (Metekel, western Ethiopia).

drop its 'ethno' prefix and reframe itself as archaeology *tout court*: the archaeology of the present, in that it deals with people that are alive and things that are in full use, and which accepts that all presents are entangled with a diversity of pasts in a percolating time (Serres with Latour 1995, Olivier 2000:393, 400).

In what follows I use three examples from my own work to show the chaotic nature of time in present contexts. I will first talk about the Gumuz of lowland Ethiopia, a group of Nilo-Saharan swidden cultivators, but I will choose a very peculiar and heterodox piece of material culture to exemplify my point. Instead of pots or hoes, I will consider rifles.

The Gumuz have many rifles that are used as much for performing male identities as they are for killing neighbours in frequent feuds. In my research over the last six years I have documented guns ranging in date from

the late 19th century to the 1980s. Among the most remarkable specimens is an M1870/87 Vetterli-Vitali (Dibas'i, Mambuk wereda). This was the type of rifle used by the Italian army in the famous battle of Adwa in 1896, where the colonial troops were defeated by Abyssinians – a feat with global repercussions at that time. It was also the gun employed by slave traders during the first third of the 20th century and aristocratic hunters from the Abyssinian Highlands when they descended to the Gumuz land in search of elephants and buffaloes (Abdusamad Ahmad 1988). More usual is the Mannlicher-Carcano, a rifle used by the Italian army in the invasion of Ethiopia, in 1935, and throughout the Second World War (Fig. 3) – and, incidentally, the weapon that killed J.F. Kennedy in 1963. Gumuz ironsmiths use a pre-industrial technology to transform the bullets of the more modern

automatic rifles into the Mannlicher-Carcano calibre. Finally, it is possible to find the most advanced Soviet guns of the 1980s, which flooded Ethiopia during the recent civil war.

Here, in moving from the oldest rifles to the newest ones, I have used the linear temporality of modern historicism. But the Vetterlis and the Kalashnikovs are all now sharing the same space – with hand-made pottery, calabashes and wooden hoes. So in the same house you can find an AKS-74 produced in 1987 in Moscow adjacent to a bamboo bow with arrows – a 20 000-year-old technology. As Michel Serres (Serres with Latour 1995:57) has pointed out 'things that are very close can exist in culture, but the line makes them appear very distant from one another' (also Latour 1993:72–73). As archaeologists we consciously separate the Vetterli and the AKS-74, in time but they are both together here and now, as are the seemingly archaic events inextricably related to them: slavery, aristocratic hunting, civil war, all are present in contemporary Ethiopia. What we see is process rather than static being (Shanks 2005) and, therefore, it is a different synthesis – a topology – that we truly need for doing an archaeology of the present, rather than chronology: a mechanism that allows us to map the relations between different percolating pasts in the present (Witmore in press). In my opinion, it is especially easy to see the intricate flowing of time in non-capitalist living contexts such as this, where technologies and artefacts last longer, mix in strange ways and provide uncanny and catachretic juxtapositions (Shanks 2004) of things and events. Without the 'harsh disciplining' of modern temporality (Latour 1993:72), things can fold and unfold through different times in truly amodern societies.

Yet the percolation of time does not only mean that the past is here in multifarious ways (through a 19th century rifle or a millennia-old ceramic pot) but also that 'contemporary things can become very distant' (Serres with



Fig. 3. A Gumuz man armed with an Italian 6.62 mm Mannlicher-Carcano, made by Beretta in 1932 (*Manjäre, Metekel, western Ethiopia*).

Latour 1995:59). Ethiopia is also a good place to reflect on events very proximate in linear time that become distant in terms of particular relations. In this country, as in many others in Africa, it could be said that the past is tomorrow: one can see farmers ploughing with a wooden plough (a 1st millennium BC technology in the Horn of Africa), near the decaying ruins of advanced agricultural machinery – the remains of the modernizing impetus of the previous communist regime (1974–1991) (González-Ruibal 2006a) (Fig. 4). Modern tractors, mechanized farms and storage tanks – world-objects (Serres 2000:12–13) – have reverted to the local and they are now the archaic. This inversion of times jars modern reason and reveals the fragility of its foundational myths (linear time, science, technology): pasts can return (Witmore in press).

Futuristic ruins: factories and model farms lie abandoned in the forest, while people have gone back to the familiar digging stick – the oldest agricultural implement. Some woodlands have been

irremediably damaged by a modern agricultural science that does not care for the Earth, and it is the know-how of the ancient swidden cultivators, with their archaic techniques, that can heal such wounds. Serres has pointed out how time flows ‘according to an extraordinarily complex mixture, as though it reflected stopping points, ruptures, deep wells, chimneys of thunderous acceleration, rendings, gaps...’ (Serres with Latour 1995). The short supermodern gap of Ethiopia, between two non-modern existences, can be regarded as a chimney of thunderous acceleration or as a deep well in the whimsical flowing of time. In the words of Bruno Latour (1993:74) we can no longer say whether these ruins are ‘outmoded, up to date, futuristic, atemporal, nonexistent, or permanent’. Capitalism is not necessarily the future, the last layer of our archaeological sites.

I will finish this section with one more example, this time from Brazil. While carrying out archaeological research among the Awá hunter-gatherers (Cormier 2003b),



Fig. 4. *Abandoned agricultural machinery in Bambasi (Benishangul, western Ethiopia).*

in Maranhão (Brazil) my colleagues and I found an interesting dump, located near the FUNAI (National Indian Foundation) post, in charge of the protection of the local indians (Hernando *et al.* 2005). Most of the rubbish was modern refuse produced by the FUNAI officers living in the post: tin cans, aluminium foil, glass, plastic. However, the dump had removed the soil and exposed an archaeological site (Fig. 5). Among the findings there were hundreds of hand-made pot sherds, mostly belonging to large vessels, but also polished stone axes. Such refuse is indicative of swidden agriculturalists. Therefore, a group of cultivators must have lived in that area – perhaps the ancestors of a neighbouring group, the Tenetehara. The area is occupied now by a community of hunter-gatherers, who walk through the dump to go to their hunting grounds. History is mixed up, dug over and exposed in a few square metres in the middle of the Amazonian forest. This mixture of times may appear bizarre for us, with our evolutionary, unilineal concepts of time, but not for them, who live in another temporality. For the Awá, the past can be tomorrow, because it is viewed as an alternate spiritual realm existing simultaneously with the present (Cormier 2003:123).

These seemingly anachronistic examples run against the commonsensical tenets of much ethnoarchaeology: among non-capitalist groups the present is primitive; things have always been this way; the modern comes after the premodern. What we truly have is a mess of times and things, memories and peoples, and archaeology must make the most of it, delving into temporal multiplicities, instead of imposing radical and untenable divides, freezing Others in time, and erasing what does not easily fit within our linear schemes.

THINGS/PEOPLE

The division of labour of the social sciences has it that anthropologists must study people

and ideas – institutions, personhood, social structures (the immaterial) – and archaeologists (or ethnoarchaeologists) things-in-themselves. I have wondered how can we sort out the Neolithic in Gumuz culture and now I wonder how can we tear off things from ideas and objects from humans.

Anthropology is, in a sense, more modernist today than it was in 1900. When reading old anthropology books one marvels at their material richness. Things and people were much less separate than they are today. There was no need for a *Journal of Material Culture* or *Visual Anthropology Review* because *all* anthropology was visual and was concerned with the material, at least as much as it was concerned with words and ideas. Most ethnographers recorded everything, from houses and palaces to ear-polishers and lip-plugs – and legends, marriage rules, body scarifications. It would be interesting to trace the genealogy of anthropology's disinterest for the material (Lemonnier 1992:11). As Lemonnier notes, great anthropologists such as Boas, Kroeber or Haddon were interested in material culture. For Anthony Alan Shelton (2000:174–175) the publication of Radcliffe-Brown's *The Andaman Islanders* in 1922 marked the end of things as part of the mainstream discipline of anthropology. Material culture in this monograph was relegated to a mere appendix. From then on 'more often than not, anthropology ignored material culture and concentrated on the interconnections between social groups or institutions contained within the "tribe"'. Material culture was relegated to museum ethnography, a field that got stuck in 19th century premises, including orthodox evolutionism. Material culture, however, still loomed large in ethnographies produced in France and especially Germany until the mid-20th century and even later, a fact that can be attributed to divergent theoretical trajectories; but even in those places, material culture was detached from cultural anthropology, only interested in society and



Fig. 5. *A modern dump with ancient pottery sherds in Posto Indígena Awá (Maranhão, Brazil).*

its immaterial products. Most of the time, then, anthropologists dematerialize the world, whether by ignoring its utter materiality, or by sanitizing the mess of real life, which they translate in idealized images of structural order (a genealogical diagram or the plan of a house).

If we return, however, to the first three or four decades of the 20th century, we will find a quite different situation. Not that things and people were completely mingled and symmetrically displayed (the Great Divides were clearly there), but certainly we can discern more symmetry in that period – understanding symmetry as the simultaneous construction of people and things (Latour 1993) – than we can find today. At least, their way of mediating other cultures was more faithful – if unwittingly – to the essential mixture of people, things and animals as were perceived and lived by those amodern communities they worked with. Examples are plentiful, but I will briefly mention two: the German ethnographic expedition in Central Africa (1907–1908) and the famous French journey from Dakar to Djibouti led by Marcel Griaule (1931–1933). The first was published in several volumes by Jan Czekanowski (1911, 1917, 1924), the second saw a large number of influential publications, including the superb literary diaries of Michel Leiris (1934) and Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmili* (1966). A summary of the expedition was published in the second issue of the journal *Minotaure*, a magazine of art and literature (Mission Dakar-Djibouti 1938). During the last decades, many anthropologists have rightly criticized these works, and similar ones, as narrowly empiricist and, worst of all, colonialist and racist. Many ethnographers were so interested in material culture that they did not hesitate to steal sacred artefacts. To be sure, it is necessary to demolish the image of the white man in tropical helmet and shorts taking photos of a scared native woman. Yet it is also necessary

– though more difficult and risky – to recover whatever was right on those scientific undertakings.

Czekanowski's publications are a good example of the German tradition. They include very detailed accounts of the different ethnic groups that inhabited Uganda, Congo and southern Sudan, all of whom follow the same model: social organization, religious practices, subsistence practices, material culture. What is interesting about this research is the author's keen eye for the mundane materials of the everyday. Artefacts were painstakingly recorded, catalogued, measured, photographed and drawn, without any discrimination whatsoever (Fig. 6): we have shovels, mortars, stools and bows but also knots and weaves. The textual descriptions are also rich and artefacts are not merely presented as reflections of social institutions (material metaphors), but as elements worthy of study per se: a scarification, an arrow and a kinship tie are devoted more or less the same space in the work – the second volume has 80 pages of material culture out of 400 (Czekanowski 1917) and the others are better balanced towards the material. We get a certain impression that we are dealing with collectives of humans and things here, in the sense that both are given importance. There is obviously a lack of real intertwining (co-constitution) between the material and the immaterial, a lack of agency in things, whereas the diverse elements (things, institutions, bodies) are displayed in well-compartmentalized boxes (see criticisms in Hahn 2003). However, the rich treatment of material culture in these early ethnographic works, soon to disappear in most literature (especially within the Anglosaxon canon), has to be revalued.

The publication of the Mission Dakar-Djibouti (1938) is outstanding for other reasons. It is a short book full of quality illustrations, which contrasts with the current shame that ethnographers have of including images in their books (cf.



Fig. 6. *Some elements of the material culture used by the Bakondjo group (Uganda): pottery, baskets, headrests, wooden vessels, stools, knots. After Czekanowski (1917).*

Webmoor 2005:65–66). Today, pictures are systematically restricted to a dozen photos inserted in the middle of the publication, as a dispensable appendix (note that it is the same in most publications, as an epistemic convention): the real thing – real knowledge – is in the text. In contrast, the magazine of the French expedition has 191 photographs in 88 pages, some of them of an amazing richness and texture (Fig. 7). Photographs constitute independent items of information per se (not mere postcards to prove that ‘we’ve been out there’) (Shanks 1997). Admittedly, the format of the publication was a peculiar one – a special issue of an art journal. Yet there is obviously no fear of photography: it is the boldness that provides unreflexive practice,

for sure, but also a sense that things are relevant. Marcel Griaule himself published several works on different aspects of the material culture of the Dogon and other communities studied during the expedition. Meaningfully, in his methodological introduction to the 1938 publication, he writes: ‘all human activities are translated into objects, and we can say that, theoretically, it would be possible to achieve knowledge of a society by founding the observation on everything it has created or used and by surrounding it with a maximum of documentation’ (Griaule 1938:7). His aims and methods were perhaps misled (they certainly were, from an ethical point of view), but artefacts as translations of human



Fig. 7. Dogon granaries in Mali. After *Mission Dakkar-Djibouti* (1938).

engagements did have a strong presence in that ethnography.

Material culture studies now are flawed by different reasons (Olsen 2003) and my point is that a symmetrical (ethno)archaeological approach might reconfigure the division between the material and the immaterial as an indistinguishable whole. Today we are left with things or ideas alone, instead of collectives: one has to decide if she or he wants to study society, artefacts or society through artefacts. Collectives are never in the picture. And even when one chooses to study objects, it is usually in a very narrow sense: only a category of artefact at a time, as we will see.

Thus, the German school has kept a totalizing view of material culture, which can be seen in the diverse monographies of sub-Saharan African communities that are still being published (cf. Best 1993, Geis-Tronich 1991, Kroger 2001, Hahn 2003,

2005). Even if they have kept and sometimes developed the material richness of early anthropology, the problems with their approach are threefold: first, they do not deal with people and things anymore (as in late 19th and early 20th century ethnography), but with things-in-themselves; second, they rarely have taken into account Western artefacts; and finally, they usually work with outdated sociological frameworks (but see Hahn 2005).

The French or French-speaking tradition, following Durkheim's and later Mauss' legacy, is much richer from a sociological point of view, but it is rarely totalizing (see the journal *Téchniques et culture*). Thus, the Pétréquins study axes (Pétréquin 1993) or pots (Pétréquin 1999) in impressive detail and with remarkable sociological sensibility, but they do not explore the relations between them, the whole ecology of things in the Melanesian societies that they study. In fact, with a few exceptions (Lemonnier 1992), few authors deal with full material assemblages. Pierre Lemonnier (1992:9) has pointed out 'how little chance there is of understanding the material culture of any society by studying just a few artefacts, or, worse, by studying artefacts of only a single type'. On the other hand, anthropologists such as Godelier, Meillassoux or Clastres rarely take material culture into account; at the most, they see objects as material metaphors of wider social facts (e.g. Godelier 2002).

Finally, the Anglo-Saxon (and more specifically British) school, with its prevailing focus on Western artefacts, after the post-colonial turn, reflected in the *Journal of Material Culture*, has also deprived us of the holistic approaches of early ethnographies. They have even led us further away from other ways of using, thinking and engaging with material culture. This is what happens when anthropologists return home from the tropics, as Latour (1993:100) bemoans. Thus, material culture specialists study cars (Miller 2001), radios (Schiffer 1991), trench-art (Saunders 2003) or lingerie (Storr 2003).

And even when they dare look beyond their home towns, Anglo-Saxon material culturists seem to be interested only in very partial studies – see, for example, the otherwise wonderful work of Glassie (1999). Ethnoarchaeology has been, in some cases, a way of engaging more fully with the materiality of traditional communities (e.g. Watson 1979, Hodder 1982, Horne 1994), but the problem in this case, as it was said at the beginning of this paper, is the radical distinction usually drawn between past and present; the former only studied by virtue of their use in the past (but see Sillitoe 1998).

By losing sight of assemblages of people and things, we have also forgotten matter at large, which is no longer present even as a blank scenario of the ethnographic work. We have baskets, or cars, or the mother's brother, or middle-class homes, or pimps. Yet few people undertake the detailed empirical task of describing and representing all the artefacts, details and textures present in a house, village or town, along with its inhabitants – people and animals – in order to engage with the messiness and material density of the world we inhabit (but see

Buchli & Lucas 2001, Shanks 2004). Maybe we have to go back to the tropics with a new gaze and learn how to deal with materiality.

Again, when I walk through a village in Ethiopia, I do not experience the place as represented in most ethnographic works. I do not find well-delineated spaces, moities, symbolic axes, or the embodied cosmos, nor can I distinguish pots, people or houses as separate entities. I see bamboo fences, bones, mud, dust, pottery sherds, ashes, trodden soil, and excrements (Fig. 8). I smell rubbish and flowers, food and sweat; I hear children singing, goats bleating and the sound of the sickle on the sorghum stalks. That's the place people live immersed in: what most archaeologists call 'background noise' (Witmore in press) and the repugnant laboratory that philosophers of science abhor (Latour 1993:21). Maybe I can notice the sherds, the bleats and the rubbish because, unlike Geertz (1973:22) and Clifford (1997:21), I do study villages, not simply *in* villages. For me, villages are not the scenario of transactions between people, but a collective of people, things, animals and materializations of their manifold transactions. And this does not



Fig. 8. Ashes, stones, pots, soil: walking through a Gumuz village (*Manjäre, Metekel, western Ethiopia*).

mean that settlements and houses do not have meaning, do not embody the cosmos or replicate the body, but the meaning is brought up in practice (Bourdieu 1990) through daily sensuous engagements with those chaotic places (González-Ruibal 2006b). They are not inscribed as the geometric surface of a white sheet of paper, as the ethnographer seems to imagine it. How is it that, if the particular collective that are the Gumuz mobilizes fences and excrements, tombs and goats' bones, doors, pots, children and ancestors, they disappear from the idealized representation of space and culture that ethnographers give us? All the materiality of place is erased by anthropology and much archaeology (cf. Tilley 1994:7–11), both in discourse and in its visual representation (Olsen 2003, 2006, Shanks 2004; Webmoor 2005).

Archaeologists have a keen sense for the material, for entropic decay and at times abject detail (Pearson & Shanks 2001: 91–93, Shanks *et al.* 2004). Yet when it comes to present a site, they often act as

anthropologists, cleaning the mess, ordering the ruins, privileging the ideal over the material, avoiding the 'repugnant task of digging into the substance of things' (Olsen 2006:97). In my study of abandoned peasant houses in Galicia (Spain) (González-Ruibal 2005), I came to realize that messiness was key to grasp the gist of the overall phenomenon: mass emigration and traumatic cultural change. Decay was not the archaeological process that had to be cleared up to reach meaning about hidden social issues, but decay, dirt, disorder – the abject – were themselves the issues. It was not possible to understand rural Galicians without the ruinous and derelict landscape that mediated their lives (Fig. 9). That could be, in my opinion, another substantial contribution of an archaeology of the present to a symmetrical archaeology. It offers another way of approaching the deep relations between humans and things that does justice to their essentially chaotic, messy nature. It should respect the collectives we study without asymmetrically sorting out and tearing



Fig. 9. *An abandoned house in Córcores, Galicia (northwestern Spain).*

apart its human and material components. It rethinks anew the role of things (as 'objects' are the outcome of such relations) in the construction of collectives (Latour 1993:55). At the end of the day, it is all a matter of translation: 'articulating aspects of the material world – something of the locality, multiplicity, and materiality – that are often sieved away by paper-based modes of documentation' (Witmore 2004, in press).

CONCLUSION: THE NATURAL CONTRACT

In this article, I have argued that ethnoarchaeology must be refashioned as the archaeology of the present and, in this way, it can help to bypass annoying Cartesian dualisms. This archaeology works with living communities, studies collectives composed of humans, animals and things, investigates the textures of daily life, and assesses the complex nature of time, as enmeshed in things and landscape. This archaeology of the present goes beyond 'social' anthropology, which has forgotten things; recent material culture studies, which have dispensed with totalities of artefacts (the British and French school) or with people and ideas (the German school); ethnoarchaeology, which studies only objects and creates a divide between past and present; and asymmetrical archaeology, which has done without materiality and tries to impose an anthropologically-influenced order and meaning on the things it studies. The archaeology of the present is not conceived as an analogical practice, which seeks in some living cultures inspiration for understanding dead others. Nonetheless by carrying out this kind of research, we can still contribute to archaeology and anthropology as a whole, by encouraging a more reflexive, symmetrical and materially-conscious practice.

Finally, working with the non-modern communities of the present may be relevant from another point of view: it alerts against

the dangers of the modern divides and its practical outcomes. My work in Ethiopia, Spain and Brazil with non-capitalist societies has an elegiac stance. I am documenting the end of other ways of living with nature and culture, things and people, past and present – an end imposed by a very asymmetrical way of reasoning and engaging with the world. From this point of view, I am doing an archaeology of the vanishing present (with apologies to Gayatri Spivak). The end of other rationalities and other ways of engaging with the world comes hand in hand with an attempt to obliterate the past and to fill the present with rubbish and rubble: deforested woodlands, shattered vernacular spaces, factories in the jungle.

In his book *The natural contract*, Michel Serres (1995:25) says that 'if our rational could wed the real, the real our rational, our reasoned undertakings would leave no residue; so if garbage proliferates in the gap between them, it's because that gap produces pollution, which fills in the distance between the rational and the real. Since the filth is growing, the breach between the two worlds must be getting worse'. In my work with the Bertha and Gumuz of the Ethiopian lowlands, the Awá of the Amazon and my own kinsfolk, the Galician peasants, I am exploring this breach filled with rubbish and I am trying to find out how to bring the real and the rational together: how to heal these wounds, if there is still time.

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NOTES

¹ This ontological symmetry must never be mistaken with an ethical symmetry between people and things. For Bruno Latour 'To be symmetric ... simply means not to impose a priori spurious asymmetry among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations. There are divisions one should never try to bypass, to go beyond, to try to overcome dialectically. They should rather be ignored and left to their own devices, like a once formidable castle now in ruins' (Latour 2005:76). Some recent work on the agency of things, albeit giving more relevance to the material world, still presents people and things as two intrinsically separate beings. In so doing, agency, formerly the strict property of humans-in-themselves, is now transposed to artefacts-in-themselves (e.g. Gosden 2005). On the other hand, asking about what objects or pictures want, the rhetorical purpose notwithstanding, gets close to establishing a dangerous ethical symmetry between people and things.

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