Special Section
Animating Archaeology: of Subjects, Objects and Alternative Ontologies

Introduction

Benjamin Alberti & Tamara L. Bray

In the early days of anthropology, indigenous concepts of animating essences and the cross-cutting nature of the life-force, expressed in such terms as *hau* and *mana*, were front and centre in the ethnographic literature (e.g. Mauss 1954; 1975; Malinowski 1922; 1936; 1948). Branded as 'mystical', 'primitive' and 'unscientific' for more than a generation, however, such potentially key conceptual sites of alterity have only recently begun to be revisited and recuperated within anthropology and in other fields such as material culture studies and cognitive sciences. The articles in this special issue of *CAJ* consider what archaeology might contribute to the general theoretical discussion on animism and alternative ontologies. As a set, they offer a diversity of perspectives on how the recognition of animism as a prevalent theme within contemporary indigenous worlds can affect archaeological analysis and interpretation. They also offer ideas about how attending to the significance of such concepts may provide new analytical purchase on alternative ontologies and ways of constructing, dissolving, or transforming traditional dichotomies that continue to powerfully shape our worlds.

To take 'animism' as a new analytical orientation in archaeology requires re-thinking key theoretical and methodological issues in the field. We are presently at a potential turning point in archaeological theorizing around the nature of its primary object, the material world. The 'ontological turn' in the academy (e.g. Gell 1998; Harman 2009; Henare *et al.* 2007; Law 2004; Strathern 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1992; 1998; 2004), when viewed through the prism of anthropologies of animism has the potential to fundamentally change how we conceptualize what it is we 'see' when we unearth other peoples' past lifeworlds. This moment comes on the heels of on-going dialogue in archaeology and elsewhere about the nature of ontology, materiality, agency and the respective roles 'objects' and 'subjects' play as agents in the world (e.g. Chapman 2000; Fowler 2004; Gosden 2005; Joyce 2008; Knappett & Malafouris 2008; Meskell 2004; Renfrew *et al*. 2004). In re-visiting the ethnographic and ethnohistorical texts of peoples once classed as animists we find indigenous accounts serving as both models for the exploration of past peoples through the archaeological record and as an intellectual resource for modelling theories about the archaeological record (e.g. Brown & Emery 2008; Hall 1997; Mills & Ferguson 2008; Zedeño 2008). In contrast to an important set of papers in a recent issue of the *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* which aimed to identify material signatures of animist practices in the archaeological record (see Brown & Walker 2008), the articles included in this special issue collectively aim to actuate the idea of animism as a way to think through core theoretical issues in archaeology around the nature of matter, ontology and agency.

Discussions of animism have always been bent to fit western conceptual categories and theories. As a consequence, the characterizations of animism and animist practice reflect the terms of their deployment within western discourse — from E.B. Tylor's (1993 [1871]) founding work to the present — as the conditions of the concept's rejection and acceptance have changed. Academically, animism has its origin in nineteenth-century evolutionary thought. As originally deployed by Tylor (1993 (1871)) within an anthropological framework, animism referred to the earliest of religious states in which people attributed inanimate things with souls, spirits or animating essences. For Tylor, animism represented an originary, if irrational and erroneous, theory about the nature of the world (Harvey 2006, 5–9). Reference to the notion of animism by social theorists who followed (e.g. Huxley 1881; Freud 1913; Piaget 1929, all cited in Harvey 2006) served as a convenient foil to further emphasize the presumed contrast between primitive or child-like modes of intellectual reasoning and that of modern peoples.

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In the last twenty years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in theories of animism and an associated reformulation of its parameters in which we see the original focus on religion being expanded to encompass relations with the non-human world in general (see Bird-David 1999; Descola 1992; Harvey 2006; Viveiros de Castro 1992; 1998; Stringer 1999). As one spokesperson for the 'new animism' suggests, animists take as axiomatic that 'the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others' (Harvey 2006, xi). As a consequence of this position, one of the core issues with which animists engage concerns the question of what a person is. At the crux of this matter lies the deeply ingrained opposition between persons and things (Harvey 2006, xvii). Within the framework of animism, 'persons' are construed as 'those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity' (Harvey 2006, xvii). According to Harvey's generalizing schema, then, the fact that some persons may look like objects is of little consequence to animists, who recognize a much wider range of persons and who do not take humans as the primary exemplars of personhood. Given these basic parameters, animism is now commonly understood to refer to a way of engaging with the world that is ontologically distinct from that of 'the moderns' (e.g. Descola 1996; 2005; Ingold 2000; 2006; Pedersen 2001; 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2004).

There is a significant divide among authors, however, on the goals or possibilities of animist-derived theories within academic work. Even though a strong critical current runs through much of this recent work, as exemplified in its desire to de-naturalize western dualisms such as nature/culture, attempts to synthesize animist thought have been criticized for attempting to establish 'meta-schemes' (see Latour 2009). For example, according to Descola (2005) animism can be viewed as one of the four fundamental modalities through which humans confront nature. In a recent critique of Descola's position, Viveiros de Castro (2006) forcefully countered this attempt to build an all-encompassing model and stressed that animism (reformulated as 'perspectivism') is instead a theoretical 'bomb' (after Latour 2009), constituting the basis for a fundamental challenge to dominant western understandings of culture and nature rather than simply adding an additional layer of complexity to existing theoretical schema.

In this collection of articles we identify four main themes that cross-cut the individual contributions: (1) what to do about modern 'dualisms'; (2) the nature of relational ontologies; (3) the problematic of 'object agency'; (4) and the methodological implications of researching relational and other ontologies.

The dilemma of dualisms

Attending to the significance of concepts derived from animist or relational thought provides new analytical purchase on alternative ontologies and ways of constructing or transforming traditional modern dichotomies, such as subject/object, matter/meaning and culture/nature. Dualisms are at once reductive of the multiplicity of entities, conditions and qualities that comprise the world and are what allow us to begin to make sense of the entangled reality we daily confront. Dualistic thinking and the tendency towards dichotomization can thus be seen as potentially both a help and a hindrance. When used to describe our, or others', worlds it falls short, locking life into a rigid set of possibilities and enacting 'constitutive exclusions' through which dualistic structures are maintained. Latour (1993) has explored how dualistic thinking in the form of the nature/culture binary has led to the characterization of non-scientific thinking as 'faulty thought' and to the notion of a singular 'nature' to which scientific thought has privileged access. The 'asymmetries' produced have been highlighted by Viveiros de Castro (2004) in relation to the devaluing of indigenous theories and the reduction of their worlds to inadequate representations of nature. Dualisms such as nature/culture may be our 'enemy' but they are our absolutely necessary enemy, the 'furniture we never cease to move' (Viveiros de Castro 2006, 18). A more subtle vision of the relationship between dualism and social reality is one in which such dualisms exist for a given group but are deliberately unfinished, the 'holes' in the structure thus provoking thought (Viveiros de Castro 2006, 17). Animist thought is one resource that can be used to explore the gaps in our own dualistic structures of thought, opening the door to more pluralistic understandings of and approaches to the world, celebrating, rather than problematizing, multiplicity. In this regard, and because of its association with numerous indigenous communities, many of the contributors to this special issue see animism as a useful new point of departure for exploring the archaeological record. Though all the contributors are sympathetic to the notion of 'animating archaeology', some are clearly more concerned with developing methodological strategies for identifying when and how specific objects or categories of things may have been construed as animated actors within their original social contexts (Bray; Groleau; Sillar; Zedeño). Others take it as given that preindustrial peoples inhabited

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a world in which both human and other-than-human beings mutually constituted lived reality and work from this point to derive better understanding of this ontological stance via archaeological contexts and materials (Herva; Thomas). We see this diversity of approaches as a healthy engagement with a provocative set of theoretical premises enjoying a creative resurgence of interest in various quarters.

In archaeology, the problematic tenacity of dualistic thinking is well recognized (e.g. Oliveira & Thomas 2007). Sillar (this issue), for instance, notes the linguistic inadequacies we face in our attempts to discuss and analyze dialectical relations between subject/object realms. Even so, the representationalist's gap between words and things, or mind and matter, may be precisely the point where difference can be recognized in relation to our archaeological materials and other peoples' worlds. If a dualist substance ontology is our greatest hindrance to 'ontological breakthrough' (Henare *et al*. 2007), we might still find that we can employ it heuristically. In her investigation of alternative, specifically Andean, ontologies, Bray (this issue) adapts the ethnographic methodology of Henare *et al*. (2007) outlined in *Thinking Through Things* to construct an analytic framework in which an understanding of the Andean notion of *camay* can be construed simultaneously as both thing and concept. Alberti & Marshall (this issue) 'fuse' the concept-thing of 'body-pot' to enable the ontological possibilities of anthropomorphic forms in first-millennium AD northwest Argentina to emerge. While dualisms clearly cannot be surmounted by sheer resolve, they may be harnessed to serve the purpose of revealing the extent of the gap between modern concepts and archaeological evidence.

Relational ontologies

All the authors in this issue work through the consequences of reconfiguring ontology as, at basis, relational. The modernist ontology, which divides mind and matter into two self-sufficient realms, has been critiqued by scholars across the disciplinary spectrum from anthropology to philosophy to religion to information science. In Latour's answer to substantivist ontology[1], all persons and things are potentially 'actants', and ontologically indistinguishable. Several of the papers included here align with Latour's project (e.g. Bray; Zedeño; Sillar; Herva). Their especial originality is diffracting the 'question' of ontology through an archaeological and anthropological focus on animacy and relationality. As such, the work of anthropologists such as Ingold and Viveiros de Castro is a great influence. In his reinterpretation of the relationship between people and things in the pre-modern town of Tornio in Finland, Herva (this issue) argues that a relational ontology underlies both the folk stories and archaeological deposits. Evidence from house deposits and use wear on pipe stems and pottery demonstrate the intimate relationship between the material world and the local inhabitants. Moving away from a focus on shamanism and narrative accounts of daily routines, Dowson (this issue) interprets European Paleolithic and Levantine rock art as evidence for a much broader 'animic' system that included the active, relational engagement between humans and non-humans in their mutual efforts to ensure the ongoing revitalization of life through the flow of supernatural forces.

The interrelationship between modern substantivist and other ontologies has consequences for archaeological interpretation. The masking of relational ontologies by scientific knowledge practices is both warning and signal to examine more carefully ethnohistorical (Dowson; Sillar) and ethnographic (Alberti & Marshall) sources with an eye to 'ontological contamination' (whether such accounts have been unreflexively rendered over a western ontological frame). In relation to early accounts of animist practices in Peru, Sillar (this issue) reveals the fascinating recursiveness among local practices, the dominant substantivist ontology, representation and theory production in anthropology as perpetuated by misunderstandings resulting from the impossibility of adequate translation. For Haber (this issue), the intimate nature of relational practices is carried through to its logical consequences. His 'relational archaeology' relies on a reflexive practice based on his involvement with the local Andean communities where he works as he charts a course 'from research *on* animism to research *from* animism'. His emergent theory underlines the logic of conservation practices that deny a continuation of relational practices while simultaneously revealing their own inadequacy as a 'management' strategy. A paradoxical situation has emerged where vicuña hunting by local peoples has been banned and, as a consequence, these people are now employed by the State to assist in the shearing of the now over-populated herds. Haber describes the effect this context has had on his archaeology.

Object agency

The term animism has always implied that other-than-human beings can express agency or be social agents of some sort. The extent to which objects can be

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said to have or be the source of agency has provoked considerable debate, especially since the publication of influential works by Latour (1993) and Gell (1998), although the issue is clearly much older (for current approaches in archaeology, see Knappett & Malafouris 2008). Latour's famously 'flat' ontology (Harman 2009, 207) that stipulates that no *a priori* distinction be made between persons and non-persons when considering the constitution of society has enabled objects to be treated as equal partners in the constitution of society and the production of agency (in archaeology, see Jones 2002; Martin 2005; Olsen 2003; Witmore 2007). Gell's notion of the abduction of agency through special classes of objects such as artworks has similarly enabled 'things' to be considered 'players' in social relations. Importantly, the physical constitution of the particular thing — such as the Trobriand Islanders' canoe prowboard designed to cow by an overwhelming display of virtuosity — has important cognitive effects (in archaeology, see Alberti 2006; Alberti & Marshall, this issue; Gosden 2005; Robb 2005). The two approaches are quite different, Latour's 'actants' are neither subject nor object but true 'hybrids' or quasi-objects, whereas for Gell the agency of objects is always derived from a subject. Not surprisingly, there is little consensus among the authors in this issue as to the nature and source of agency. What the contributors do share, however, is a common approach to the question of object agency that derives directly from a concern with animism or animist theories. In particular, the concentration of articles on the Andes in this issue provides occasion for in-depth comparative reflection on the nature of Andean animism and agency. In broad agreement about the widespread extent of the practice, it becomes apparent that notions of animism and agency are local phenomena in important ways (Bray; Groleau; Haber; Sillar). In addition, specific moments of disagreement — for instance, how precisely to interpret Inca practices at Inca *capacocha* offering sites, and the extent of those practices (Bray; Sillar) — indicate the intellectual productivity of debating the fine points.

Sillar makes the most sustained contribution to the object agency debate, working through the implications of local theories of animism for archaeological theories of agency. Drawing explicitly from local Andean practice, he defines agency as 'a quality of the relationship between us and the object'. As such, the specific, local form that agency can assume shifts the terms of the larger debate (see also Sillar 2004). For this author, human action is the ultimate source of the 'social' agency of things. In contrast, Alberti & Marshall (this issue) suggest that it is not necessary to conceive of two types of agency. They argue that agency is the effect of relationships, though not relationships between fixed terms. Rather, the relationship is productive of the terms themselves (e.g. subjects and objects). Thus the act of differentiation becomes the source of agency.

Methodological moves

It is a truism that theoretical elaboration goes hand in hand with methodological reformulations (see Dobres & Robb 2005). Conversely, the sign of a conservative theory could be the lack of the need for new methodology. Clearly, it is not easy to access others' ontologies, archaeologically or otherwise. Several new studies have successfully constructed models for identifying the material signatures of specific animist practices in archaeological contexts. Brown & Emery (2008), for example, have shown how ethnoarchaeological studies can lead to the identification of animate beings and hunting shrines in highland Guatemala. In the current issue, contributors are also concerned to explore the implications of coming face to face with unexpected things and meanings, necessitating adjustments to methodologies in order to be open to such encounters. Noting that traditional taxonomies are exceedingly limited when it comes to thinking outside the Cartesian box, Zedeño (this issue) develops an approach to taxonomy within relational ontologies. Working from the principle that peoples' phenomenological experiences of the world produce ontological folk taxonomies in contrast to scientific taxonomies which are epistemological, she elaborates the concept of 'index object' as a means of uncovering the relationships between 'object-persons' and other persons that are potentially visible in the archaeological record.

Special objects provide the focus for several of the articles in the issue (Alberti & Marshall; Bray; Groleau; Sillar; Zedeño). Combining a critical use of analogy, an emphasis on animism and ritual as practice with a biographical approach, Groleau (this issue) is able to identify contexts with 'special objects' at the Wari site of Conchopata in the central Andes. Tracing anthropomorphic and other jars as they cross offering contexts, she demonstrates that a far more generalized offering tradition existed than was previously supposed on the basis of 'elite' materials alone. Providing an interesting point of contrast with Zedeño's taxonomy which relies on consistency in identification of animated objects, Groleau argues that objects were animated through practice rather than animacy being an inherent quality of specific classes of objects.

The broad relevance of the types of questions identified here to archaeology is indicated by the geographic and temporal reach of the case studies. These

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range from seventeenth century Finland (Herva) to prehistoric Europe (Dowson), from the pre-Columbian era to the present in the central and southern Andes (Alberti & Marshall; Bray; Groleau; Haber; Sillar), to contemporary and ancient native North America (Zedeño). This reach speaks less to the pervasiveness of animistic beliefs and more to the weightiness of the issues raised by a focus on animism. Part of the discursive work that the term 'animism' does here is to transgress conventional definitions. To animate archaeology, then, is to explore what archaeology might contribute to the general theoretical discussion on animism, animacy and alternative ontologies and, recursively, what animist theories and a consideration of animacy might contribute to archaeology. In addition, 'to animate' implies movement — it is precisely a sense of dynamism in the relations that constitute worlds and entities that an animated archaeology explores.

There are arguably two principal ways in which 'animating' archaeology, and the papers in this issue, shift the terms of debate in the discipline: firstly, by bringing to light a whole range of practices and beliefs in the past that correspond to animist style ontologies; and, secondly, by drawing from animist theories and ontologies to drive conceptual and methodological reconfiguration. The former innovates by treating archaeological materials as potentially evidence of something other than a substance or a sign-vehicle; in other words, as evidence of material-discursive continuities rather than ontological separation (see Holbraad, this issue). If the latter is adopted, what becomes clear, and is demonstrated by the papers here, is that there can be no new 'paradigm': if relational materiality and theoretical pluralism are applied equally to our material and theoretical production, then it follows that we are not after some new, general theory of things or a new ontology that can be elected as an alternative to other, more traditional forms. General schemas give way to theoretical singularities born from the particularities of each archaeological case and the theory adapted to it. In this vein, Alberti & Marshall and Haber argue that the greatest potential for animist theory lies in the challenge it could present to deep-seated western assumptions and globalizing theory. Indeed, Haber warns us that if the new animism becomes just another global theory it will likely be subsumed within the dominant epistemological model that, as we see in the case of the vicuña hunters from northwest Argentina, has very material consequences.

As Martin Holbraad remarks in the Afterward to this special section, both types of approach to animism may ultimately boil down to a serious commitment to methodological innovation that can 'keep up' with such conceptual innovation. Viveiros de Castro (2003) has argued for 'an anthropological theory of the conceptual imagination' capable of creating 'intellectual objects and relations which furnish the indefinitely many possible worlds of which humans are capable'. Rather than the wholesale adoption of animist worldviews to archaeological interpretation, in the form of analogies, it is with such 'thought experiments' (Holbraad, this issue), derived from what is unexpected or out of place archaeologically, that our evidence will be loosed from the grip of a conception of matter as inert substance and animated to yield the ontologically new.

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Note

1. A substantivist or substance ontology is one in which reality is taken to consist of autonomous, irreducible and persistent entities. For example, Descartes' ontology divides the world into two ontologically distinct substances, *res cogitans* ('thinking thing' or mind substance) and *res extensa* (corporeal substance), resulting in the ontologizing of the object/subject dualism (see Blattner 2007; Thomas 2004). In contrast, relational ontologies emphasize that relations are more fundamental than things.

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