



CHICAGO JOURNALS



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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 52, No. 6 (December 2011), pp. 896-912

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of [Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/662027>

Accessed: 16/12/2011 10:05

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## “Worlds Otherwise”

### Archaeology, Anthropology, and Ontological Difference

by Benjamin Alberti, Severin Fowles, Martin Holbraad,  
Yvonne Marshall, and Christopher Witmore

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The debate concerning ontology is heating up in the social sciences. How is this impacting anthropology and archaeology? What contributions can these disciplines make? Following a session at the 2010 Theoretical Archaeology Group conference at Brown University (“Worlds Otherwise: Archaeology, Theory, and Ontological Difference,” convened by Ben Alberti and Yvonne Marshall), a group of archaeologists and anthropologists have continued to discuss the merits, possibilities, and problems of an ontologically oriented approach. The current paper is a portion of this larger conversation—a format we maintain here because, among other things, it permits a welcome level of candor and simplicity. In this forum we present two questions (written by Alberti and Witmore, along with the concluding comments) and the responses of five of the Theoretical Archaeology Group session participants. The first question asks why we think an ontological approach is important to our respective fields; the second, building upon the first set of responses, asks authors to consider the difference that pluralizing ontology might make and whether such a move is desirable given the aims of archaeology and anthropology. While several angles on ontology come through in the conversation, all share an interest in more immanent understandings that arise within specific situations and that are perhaps best described as thoroughly entangled rather than transcendent and/or oppositional in any straightforward sense.

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#### The Ontological Turn: A Question of Relevance and Contribution

Recent years have witnessed a dramatic increase in academic labor concerned with ontology. Across the humanities and sciences this surge goes by many names: the (re)turn to things

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(Domanska 2006; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Latour 2004*b*; Olsen 2010; Preda 1999; Trentmann 2009), the ontological turn,<sup>1</sup> the speculative turn (Bryant, Smicek, and Harman 2010), new material feminism (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007), political ontology (Blaser 2009; Escobar 2008), and symmetrical anthropology and archaeology (Latour 1993, 2007; Olsen 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2003; Webmoor 2007; Witmore 2007; Shanks 2007), among others. Outwardly, the movements toward ontology across the sciences and humanities share a renewed emphasis on questions of reality and the nature of being, provoking an upheaval in how various disciplines have conceived of agency, change, causality, materiality, and relations. As a point of departure for this conversation, we ask, Why should this return to questions of ontology matter to anthropologists and archaeologists? Do archaeology and anthropology have something unique to offer?

1. Woolgar, Steve, Tarek Cheniti, Javier Lezaun, Daniel Neyland, Chris Sugden, and Christian Toennesen. 2008. A turn to ontology in STS? Paper circulated at the “A Turn to Ontology in STS?” workshop at the Said Business Center, Oxford University, June 25, 2008.

*Christopher Witmore*

To 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. The ontological question implies that the basic ingredients of the world (matter, agency, space, and time) are open to the task of (re)appraisal, whether empirical and/or speculative. We are currently in the midst of an immense project of metaphysical renegotiation; within archaeology we witness this as a movement away from the common ontology, where the past exists apart from the present, toward an ontology where pasts are spatially coextensive. The differences between these “modes of existence,” a term I borrow from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994), are of fundamental concern to archaeologists (and anthropologists). With an aim toward specifying what these differences are and why they are of concern, I think it would be useful to begin with a brief archaeological example. Consider this description.

Situated along the Via Appia Antica, by the third milestone southeast of Rome, is the tomb or mausoleum of Caecilia Metella, daughter of Q. Metellus Creticus (consul in 69 BCE), wife to Crassus. In 1306 CE, this imposing circular tomb was surmounted by a crenellated brick battlement and incorporated as the keep of the castle of the Caetani family. Several rooms of this castle abut the south side of the mausoleum. Antonio Muñoz made the largest of these castle rooms into a small museum early in the twentieth century (Gerding 2002: 16).

This brief description, which is taken largely from Filippo Coarelli's (2007) well-known archaeological guide to Rome and its environs, makes a number of common ontological assumptions about the remnants of these buildings. The entry point for this description (indeed, every discussion I have read of this monument) is the tomb of Caecilia Metella. Of the extant remains—a large circular drum encased in finished travertine block, a high square podium of concrete stripped of the majority of its stone revetment, decaying sections of brick crenellation—the description asserts that these are a tomb and castle. For the original situations of these buildings to hold such primacy, all subsequent changes are merely derivative; all ensuing historical events simply wash across deeper levels of reality, tomb and castle. These structures, then, are assumed to have essences that remain unaltered despite the adventures in change that have occurred around them over the centuries. This common ontology rests upon an Aristotelian notion of substance, and it is pervasive within archaeology.

What, however, makes the present remains a tomb and castle today? The circular drum no longer shelters the grave of a Roman consul's daughter. The series of adjacent buildings provide neither sanctuary nor protection for the family of a former cardinal. Indeed, today, just inside the gate to the series of buildings adjacent to the tower is a kiosk where an admission price of €2 is charged by the park authority. Each of these things draws upon a throng of other entities, and given

the absence of key interlocutors—a sarcophagus or cinerary urn and burial vault, soldiers, and brick circuit walls—can we therefore say that they are something else ontologically?

Alfred North Whitehead referred to the notion of an enduring object as a “vacuous actuality” (1978 [1929]:29)—this was not a compliment. No entity, for Whitehead, exists apart from its relations, and events do not stream down the side of persistent, intractable, stable substances. Rather, things, as actual entities, are utterly concrete events that are actively happening. We can speak of a tomb, a quarry for building materials, a fortress tower, an archaeological site, a museum, or a heritage monument assessable to anyone for a small price only as a chain of past events that have already perished in forming novelties. As events, these things can never escape their local conditions (here I am ignoring Whitehead's notion of “eternal objects” in favor of Bruno Latour's more secular treatment of actors [refer to Harman 2009b:102]), but neither are they derivative of something else. Today we encounter an altogether new entity, a heritage site maintained by the Parco Regionale Appia Antica, whose composite nature nonetheless draws from all of these former events.

While there are other ontological possibilities to be explored, I have presented two different modes of existence because they highlight many key features of ontological disparity at play in current debates (see Harman 2009b; Latour 2005). With the former, a tomb sustains itself, a castle persists alone as an enduring object; with the latter, a quarry, a keep, a heritage site is a network of shifting alliances with other entities. With the former, a thing is split into durable substance and transient accident, and all subsequent events become derivative of a deeper reality; with the latter, a keep is a mixed ensemble, irreducible to other entities. With the former, relations are secondary and epiphenomenal; with the latter, relations are part of the composite reality of a ruined tower. With the former, the past—the tomb of Caecilia Metella—is a starting point; with the latter, the past is an outcome and something for which one must work.

Returning to the question of So what? while we may note similarities between the second angle and poststructuralism, where plurality was rendered in terms of meaning, belief, culture, and so on (Olsen 2010), this process-relational approach cuts deeper into the realities of things.<sup>2</sup> And the stakes here are high if you consider some of the more famous controversies around the material past: Are the Elgin Marbles derivative of the Parthenon Marbles, or are they different things? Are Kennewick Man and the Ancient One the same assemblage of bones? To concede that the matters at the heart of these controversies, objects formerly held to have only one definitive and indisputable reality, might actually constitute realities in the plural opens the door to all kinds of possibilities. One can no longer argue on the basis of an assumed empirical unity as a starting point; one can no longer hold

2. On the relationship between actor-network theory and poststructuralism, see Law (2008).

to an argument that rests upon indisputable facts and that trumps all other claims.

I have not forgotten about the second question. We archaeologists tend to obsess over this issue of contribution, and this is really a matter of creativity for me. Creativity refers to that imaginative craft of forging novel associations, linkages, practices, stories—whatever—by drawing pasts into new processes of contemporary self-creation, be they collective or idiosyncratic. Whenever this occurs, archaeology contributes something.<sup>3</sup>

To close with a proviso, neither the common ontology of substance nor a process-relational approach is completely satisfactory if they are taken as oppositional extremes. While I do not hold that things exist apart from their relations, I would not go so far as to claim that they are reducible to them—Bjørnar Olsen's (2010) latest book mounts a full-scale defense of things in this regard. Whether the Via Appia Antica, a meter-tall column drum, a bit of a crenellated tower, a museum, or a milestone, none of these things are exhausted by their relations (this question of whether things hold something in reserve beyond relations or are sapped by their associations is the crux of the debate occurring around object-oriented ontology; Harman 2010a).

#### Severin Fowles

There is a widespread worry across many disciplines that certain long-standing Western assumptions about the nature of subjects, objects, and the boundary between the two have had disastrous consequences with respect to both our relationship with the environment and our (the West's) relationship with non-Western peoples. I do not think there is any question that this critique—and the deep cultural hand-wringing that has accompanied it—is the major motivation behind the recent call to rethink ontology, not only within anthropology and its sister disciplines but in the greater public discourse as well. Within the animal rights community, for instance, much has been made recently of the proposition that chimpanzees be reclassified as members of the genus *Homo*, effectively recoding them as human and raising the interesting question of the extent to which “animals” may have “human” rights. Or consider the debates surrounding Hurricane Katrina and the Haiti earthquake in which the discourse of “natural disaster” has been vigorously opposed by those who argue that such catastrophes are always at least as much a product of “cultural” politics as they are of “natural” events. Such typological revision is symptomatic of a historical moment when formerly dominant ontological

3. Consider the work of V. Gordon Childe (1936) on the rise of civilization, André Leroi-Gourhan (1993) on the externalization of memory, and Chuck Redman (2001) on long-term human relations with environments (to name but a few key figures and research) and the impact of this labor on sociocultural evolution, cognitive science, and ecology. For a consideration of what archaeology has to offer to a “risk society,” refer to Shanks and Witmore (2010).

premises have begun to erode, as Latour (2004a, 2004b) more than anyone has demonstrated (see also Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010).

How have archaeologists responded? What role have they played? From my vantage point, I see few original contributions yet, and I worry that many archaeological participants in the ontological turn, broadly conceived, have instead spent their energy struggling to claim a preexisting debate for themselves. When colleagues in other disciplines point out that objects are not merely passive but also act back, or when they say that we must take “things” much more seriously, or when they talk of materiality, many archaeologists leap into a defensive mode. Thrusting flag in ground, they argue that this is their intellectual territory. “Don't you see we've already claimed the world of things for archaeology?” says the archaeologist to the literary critic, as if the former were a seventeenth-century English colonist confronting a Frenchman who had stumbled into New England. The implicit—and sometimes explicit—demand is that other disciplines acknowledge archaeological authority in such matters. Thus has the political struggle to take things more seriously slipped into the disciplinary struggle to take archaeology more seriously (see Olsen 2003, 2010).

This is not to say that archaeologists have nothing special to contribute. But it does mean that we would do well to think carefully about what a distinctively archaeological intervention might look like. One strategy would be to build from the critical link between ontology and cosmogony. Consider Viveiros de Castro's (1992, 1998, 2004a) influential discussion of perspectivism, in which the salient difference between Amazonian and Western ontologies is shown to arise out of their respective myths of origin. Whereas “we” may understand humanity (culture) as having evolved out of a base animality (nature), notes Viveiros de Castro, “they” understand the diversity of animal bodies as having evolved out of a base humanity (see also Descola 2009). The cosmogenic priority between nature and culture, in other words, is reversed, and this has necessary ontological consequences. The main observation I want to underscore here is that for both Amazonian and Western traditions ontology is anchored in narrative (albeit in very different narratives). The world is as it has come to be. Ontology springs from origins—or at least is reckoned through the larger discourse about origins.<sup>4</sup>

4. This may require clarification, insofar as one commonly talks about ontology as the most foundational set of claims about the world possible—claims that are irreducible to any other set of claims. I am contesting this understanding of ontology for what I take to be quite pragmatic anthropological reasons. Indeed, one might say that most societies implicitly accept the existence of multiple worlds, each governed by its own set of ontological principles. This is true not just of something like the four worlds of the Hopi through which people have traveled to become the sorts of beings they presently are (Courlander 1987); it is equally true within modern Western thought. The scientist might claim, for instance, that the world is ontologically divided into certain basic oppositions: human versus animal, culture versus nature, subjectivity versus objectivity, mind versus matter, and so on. But of course that same

Not surprisingly, it turns out that one of the most effective means of intervening in ontological debates in the present is to rewrite our foundational narratives of the past. This was Latour's strategy in *We Have Never Been Modern*. The ultimate aim of that book may have been a revised ontology, but its method was pure cosmogeny. In a few simple diagrams, Latour turned Western history on its head. Did modernity's evolution out of premodernity really involve a successive distancing of subjects from objects? Not according to Latour. This, he suggests, is simply ideology, an ontostory of purification we have come to tell ourselves. On the ground, things look very different. Modernity, he tells us over and over, has ironically come to blur the boundaries between subjects and objects more than ever before. In other words, much of Latour's critical project has been to rewrite the grand narrative of the West as an ironic increase in fetishism and idolatry. Quite an achievement.

Now, I do not agree with Michael Shanks's (2008) recent claim that "we are all archaeologists now." Nor do I agree that archaeology has any sort of privileged perspective in these sorts of matters, as for instance when Olsen (2010:2) asserts that archaeologists are "the most dedicated students of things." Every discipline is fundamentally engaged in the study of things, be they textual things, psychological things, stone and bone things, or what have you.<sup>5</sup> (To say otherwise is to play into the very boundary between things and concepts that many seem so invested in overcoming.) But I do think that there is a special kinship between Latour's cosmogenic interventions (in particular, Latour 1999:198–215) and the archaeological project—a kinship upon which we can and should capitalize. Archaeology, as I see it, has always been the discipline not of things but of the grand narrative. This is both our burden and our distinctive means of intervening in contemporary debates. Where else does one find such extensive meditation on human origins and the story of social evolution? Where else does one find such ontologically loaded plotlines? What in the modern secular imaginary can compare with the seductive emergence story of "man the toolmaker" or his cousin, "man the hunter," with their mastery over all things mineral and animal?

My suggestion is that if we, as archaeologists, want to substantially contribute to the ontological turn, we must do more than join the chorus bemoaning Western dualisms, and we must do more than highlight the dissonance between modernist and nonmodernist ontologies in localized case studies. Let us instead pick and scrape at the buried foundations of

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scientist might also claim that a prior and very different world once existed in which "human," "culture," "subjectivity," "mind," and even "life" itself did not yet exist. All these latter ontological categories, in other words, are understood to have emerged in history—which is to say that Western ontology already exists in the plural, linked together by a grand narrative of origins.

5. Here, I follow Latour (2004b) in regarding a "thing" as a matter of concern that draws together a particular community, scholarly or otherwise.

our ontostories themselves. Let us rethink the subject-object divide during the Pliocene, when everything was still up for grabs. Or let us take seriously the ontological implications of Pleistocene encounters between *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals, encounters that both radicalize the notion of alterity and bring the boundary between human and nonhuman to a height of uncertainty. Or let us further pull apart the hero narrative of Neolithic domestication, exploring how plants domesticated us as much as we them. (Interestingly, the latter interpretation—which is entirely Latourian in spirit—was developed by David Rindos and others in the 1980s as part of an aggressively Darwinian analysis of the evolution of agriculture. Latour and Rindos may be unlikely bedfellows [although see Latour 2009], but if we are serious about developing our own conversation about symmetry in archaeology, then it would be counterproductive to ignore the nonanthropocentric impulses already present within the discipline.)

It is all well and good that archaeologists now contribute to interdisciplinary debates by writing general treatises on the ontology of things, networks, and relations. Along with many others, I am inspired by the blurring of boundaries that has placed sociocultural anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, philosophers, political scientists, and so on into greater conversation. But disciplines have intellectual histories that must be worked through, and each has its own responsibility to assess its contributions to the modernist project. In the case of archaeology, our major contribution has been the evolutionary ontostory of how the modern liberal humanist subject has come to be and of how the world of nonhumans has been drawn increasingly into his (the gendering is necessary) sphere of control. I suggest that this is where our archaeological efforts should be focused.

#### *Yvonne Marshall*

To ask why the "new" ontology matters for anthropology and archaeology is to enquire into the ontological status of our discipline(s) and their core subject matter—culture, society, and how it is possible to think about cultures and societies in comparative terms. Anthropology and archaeology are inescapably comparative enterprises because minimally they require us to understand and interpret at least one other culture or society in terms intelligible to our own—although our comparisons commonly draw on many cultures and societies.

Malinowski's (1961 [1922]) contribution to anthropology—fieldwork and participant observation—was to make the comparative terms of engagement a two-way street (Strathern 1990). During fieldwork an anthropological subject had ample opportunity to act back, to challenge, humiliate, console, enjoy, empathize with, exclude, include, or ignore the intrusions of an anthropologist. Anthropology would henceforth be a process of "two-way regard" (Geertz 1984), its products located in the breach of that regard.

So what about archaeologists? Do archaeological field subjects—stratigraphic layers, stone tools, potsherds, house

walls—act back during excavation? Not if we are to believe Alfred Gell, who accords objects only secondary agency. Objects for Gell can only be the instruments of human agency; they are not agentic in themselves (Gell 1998). So if Gell's Toyota car humiliates him by breaking down, or if a stratigraphic profile defies comprehension, reducing a trench supervisor to despair, it is not the same as being dressed down, or simply rendered invisible, by a would-be ethnographic subject. Unlike the anthropologist, in Gell's formulation our archaeologist is conversing only with herself regarding the products of her own agency, albeit via a stratigraphic profile.

As someone who has been pared down, enriched, and regularly reshaped as a human being by encounters with both would-be ethnographic subjects and stratigraphic profiles, I cannot say that I agree with Gell. Personally, I prefer the comparative terms of engagement set out by Wagner (1981 [1975]) and Strathern (1988). Wagner (1981 [1975]) argues that in the process of conducting fieldwork “the anthropologist cannot simply ‘learn’ the new culture and place it alongside the one he already knows,” a simple comparison, “but must rather ‘take it on’ so as to experience a transformation of his own world” (9). In this process of “taking on” and thereby bringing together two cultures/societies, we invent culture (and Strathern would say society similarly). According to Wagner (1981 [1975]), “an anthropologist ‘invents’ the culture he believes he is studying” and in this act of “inventing another culture, the anthropologist invents his own, and in fact invents the notion of culture itself” (4). In this formulation, culture (and society) are made—and made visible—through a comparative engagement in which all participants are in various ways marked and transformed.

So where does this leave our archaeologist, toiling in the field trying to define house walls from vague changes in soil color or back home in the laboratory measuring up potsherds? Is she “taking on” another culture in Wagner's terms? Is she, like the anthropologist, inventing them, us, and culture/society in general? Well, yes, absolutely. I certainly want to do archaeology on these terms. Even in the process of doing something as apparently straightforward and scientific as measuring a potsherd, we are indeed doing anthropology. We are entering into a mutual engagement in precisely the same sense as Wagner's hapless anthropology student suffering the ritual humiliations and joys of starting a field project. In other words, whether anthropologist or archaeologist, to practice our discipline we must place ourselves and our culture/society at risk by exposing them to the rigors of Geertz's two-way regard. The potsherd may not at first glance have the power to humble its measurer in the same way as an encounter with an ethnographic subject in the field. But measuring the potsherd is no less a comparative, cross-cultural encounter for being an engagement of object and person rather than two persons.

However, the “power” of an archaeological object to produce—or to affect—the archaeologist who regards and measures it depends on the terms of their engagement. Do we

merely seek to know about the object, or do we aspire to know the object, to experience and be subject to its regard, open to its transforming agency? Whether I talk with a living person or examine a hand ax made by people long ago, by taking on the encounter I open a space for those person(s) to transform me, directly or through the products of their making. The special challenge and unique potential in the archaeological encounter lie in the search for understandings that are not defined in terms of or encapsulated by our subjects having come to us as outcomes. In other words, how do we think our materials in their being and becoming, rather than as end points colored by the light of events that intervene between an object's becoming and our encounter with it? While our failure to meet this challenge leads inexorably to the functionalist accounts that dominate archaeology, our efforts, however inadequate, to meet this challenge are a constant provocation to difference. In taking on the new ontology, the provocation to difference comes to inhabit the center of our archaeological enterprise, transforming the enterprise itself and its effects and products.

To use Wagner (1981 [1975]) again, I argue that archaeology is, in the same sense as anthropology, “the study of man through the assumption of culture, a notion that includes the thoughts and actions of both anthropologist and his subjects as varieties of the same phenomenon” (35). Anthropology, archaeology, and culture are all products—effects, even—of comparative engagements, the coming together of alterities in ways that acknowledge and celebrate those alterities. They are engagements that hold alterities open to scrutiny without collapsing or eating them. The kinds of archaeologies we invent, produce, or effect are inseparable from the ontologies we employ to let ourselves and our subjects be. If we want an archaeology that is more than a mirror—and I certainly do—we will need to practice our discipline in ways that hold alterity open.

#### *Ben Alberti*

Taking up the question of ontology in archaeology is a provocation—a provocation to think “worlds otherwise” (Escobar 2008). We can rehearse the good reasons for embracing the wave of scholarship that has found old and new intellectual heroes to assist in rescuing the question of being from that of knowing, from its eclipse by concerns with epistemology (e.g., Barad 2007; Harman 2010*b*; Latour 2005; Olsen 2010). But that is not the only or perhaps most productive way archaeology can address the question. The word “ontology” carries considerable rhetorical and actual force. That force derives from the intuition that not all physical and conceptual worlds are alike. To retain the impact of that intuition, I conceive of ontological inquiry as a means to insert a difference (in the sense of Viveiros de Castro 2004*b*; see Alberti and Marshall 2009) in the present and in our accounts of pasts. If the notion of “culture” has worked to make commensurable differing epistemological claims (i.e., erasing al-

terity; Viveiros de Castro 2003), then ontological questions may be the appropriate ones for getting at alterity.

Broadly, we could echo Elizabeth Grosz (2005*b*), who, in claiming the necessity of exploring ontology for a feminist politics, argues that "politics, as much as life itself, is that which 'gives being to what did not exist'" (129). The task of feminist politics and knowledge, then, is to "raise new questions about materiality, cosmology, the natural order" (Grosz 2005*b*:129). Archaeology could add voice to these goals, uncovering the complicity of anthropology and other disciplines in modernity's project of determining what counts as reality (Latour 1993) and in the defense of indigenous peoples' right to "ontological self-determination" (Viveiros de Castro 2003), where postcolonial politics is as much about what exists as how we interpret it. Stepping into the archaeological heartland of materiality, object-oriented philosophies (e.g., Harman 2010*b*) and feminist work in the physical sciences raise questions about the ontological status of real-world and human exceptionalism, teaching us that the world can "interpret" itself irrespective of human involvement (e.g., Barad 2007; contributions to Alaimo and Hekman 2008). With due reconsideration of objects and things, meaning and representation give way to an understanding of things "qua things" (Olsen 2010:172), and material properties are traced as constitutive histories (Ingold 2007). There are many projects here to which archaeologists can make important contributions.

Bjørnar Olsen (2010) has compiled various philosophical and archaeological approaches to things that stress their character as something other than sign vehicles or slaves to discourse. This promises a much better look at what things are independent of our theories about them. An anthropomorphic pot such as those I study from northwest Argentina (see figures in Alberti and Marshall 2009) can be studied on its own terms and not reduced to a representation, a symbol, or a placeholder for belief. My initial encounter with this pot and others like it had to do with wanting to take it seriously as a pot but also to say something about the ideas it apparently embodied. The original question of what it means gave way to the more immediately ontological question of what it is. No part of the pot or its many relationships, as Olsen reminds us, is outside the purview of that question.

But are archaeologies of ontology always new theories about what pots are? Is that the (admittedly ambitious) limit of how we can think ontologically? Jolted by the evocation of multiple ontologies in work on Amazonian perspectivism (e.g., Vilaça 2009; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004*a*), I suspect that archaeology's contribution does not stop here. At issue is the tendency to build a theoretical framework that establishes a common denominator in order to explain a common set of concerns (i.e., the things that Olsen's things share in common). But ontology as a question seems to poke holes in the very idea that common denominators exist or that theoretical frameworks can encompass things completely. If we are to accept the challenge to fundamentals presented by Viveiros de

Castro's multiple ontologies or Karen Barad's relational ontologies, then grand theories will not do.

My point is this: archaeology can contribute to understanding new worlds, but it will not "give being to what did not exist" under the terms of any existing theory, ontologically oriented or otherwise. I can rewrite the pots as actants (Latour), partially withdrawn objects (Harman), material histories (Ingold), or perspectival subjects (Viveiros de Castro). I can, in other words, reformulate my understanding of the material world in such a way as to imagine and model the constituents of that world relating in ways that accord with the terms of a new metaontology. But such an approach forecloses the possibility of producing something different, where all the conditions shift (theory, material, past, me, etc.). I argue, therefore, that a crucial part of archaeology's contribution to ontological approaches is providing an open-ended question, an invitation to think difference. Any suggestion of having found the answer or of having discovered an alternative "ontology" should motivate us to push the question further. I would agree with Viveiros de Castro (2011), then, when he writes, "anthropology is alterity that stays alterity or, better, that *becomes* alterity, since anthropology is a conceptual practice whose aim is to make alterity reveal its powers of alteration" (145). Quite apart from bringing to light past ways of life, an ontologically oriented archaeology can induce real change in the way we conceptualize the past. The results are not case studies of past ontologies within a new foundational ontology but are specific, singular examinations of assemblages that produce the possibility of new ontoconceptual understandings (of bodies, pots, sex, or the entirely unexpected; see Alberti and Marshall 2009). What these understandings are and their effects cannot be predicated on the basis of a preestablished theoretical framework. Engagement with the specificity of the material is important, but it should have the aim of producing an unsettling effect on our concepts rather than resting at the level of description. The alterity of the past is not "captured" intact in the sense of being understood and encompassed within our theories—ontological, conceptual productions are contemporary events that "give being to that which did not exist" rather than rescue what was always there.

Grosz (2005*b*) writes that ontology is about the "mess" (my gloss) that is supposed to lie outside discourse (and what discursive approaches fear or deny) but that should be let back in as difference—not difference that sets terms against each other but as the "generation of ever-more variation or differentiation" (Grosz 2005*a*:7), that is, qualitatively, conceptually, and materially different things. Past ontologies can be reconstructed, disciplinary histories rewritten, or definitions of things recast within the broad terms of an ontological inquiry. But an ontological inquiry can also be about "inserting a difference" where sameness is assumed (Viveiros de Castro 2004*b*:18–19) or about diffracting (Barad 2007:72) various theories and material to produce something new and unexpected. In fact, the force of ontology—and archaeology's

role—may be exactly this, to act as an open question that provokes the exploration and generation of difference.

*Martin Holbraad*

It may be useful to distinguish between two ways of understanding the turn to “ontology” in anthropology<sup>6</sup> in recent years. The issue comes down to an ambiguity that was tellingly reflected in the wording of a motion debated by anthropologists a couple of years ago in Manchester: “Ontology is just another word for culture” (Venkatesan 2010). In that debate, there was some discussion about the effect that the little word “just” was having on the positions people were taking—for “ontology” can indeed be another word for “culture” in the sense that it deals with some of the issues that the notion of culture is supposed to deal with, only better. This is the position I took in that debate and the one I shall defend here. But presumably if “ontology” is “just” another word for “culture,” then either it is identical to it (which is preposterous, given at the very least the vastly divergent disciplinary genealogies of the two concepts in philosophy and anthropology) or it tries to do all the things culture was supposed to do and, presumably, does them better. This, I think, is the position detractors of the appeal to ontology in anthropology tend to ascribe to its proponents. So let me first explain why such a notion of ontology is so easy (rightly) to criticize before articulating what I take to be a better one.

Notwithstanding the notorious problems with defining “culture,” it is perhaps uncontroversial to say that different cultures are imagined as sets of ideas, practices, and, generally, ways of going about things that can be said to “belong” to different groups of people (English culture, West African culture, corporate culture, etc.). If “ontology” is just another word for “culture,” then we seem to be saying that the differences we used to designate as cultural in this way should now be understood as ontological. Two problems render this suggestion far-fetched.

First, do we really want to say that all the differences we comfortably tag as cultural are to be understood a fortiori as having a dimension of ontological difference? Is, say, greeting people with a hug (as people often do in England) ontologically different from kissing them on the cheek (as in France)? Why would one want to say that, and what would it even mean? Second, such a translation of culture into ontology seems only to magnify precisely those aspects of the notion of culture that people find most problematic. I am thinking here of problems with defining particular “cultures” in space and time: their limits, their degree of homogeneity, and so on. If the temptation on this score has long been to renounce the tendency of “culture” to unduly “reify” things (saying

6. I use the term “anthropology” in what I take to be the American sense, to include both sociocultural anthropology (which is my own field) and archaeology. In this response I shall not address the differences between the two subfields with respect to the deployment of ontologically oriented analyses (although see Holbraad 2009).

instead that cultures are fluid, porous, ever changing, heterogeneous, etc.), then the move to replace it with “ontology” only makes matters worse. Whatever this philosophically contentious term might mean, it surely pertains to the “reality” or “existence” of things.<sup>7</sup> So if the complaint against cultures has always been that they do not really “exist” as identifiable things, then calling them ontologies seems to take us in the opposite direction of reifying them further. Hence all the familiar quips that used to be leveled on culture are now thrown at ontology with even more effect: How do ontologies communicate with each other? How do they change? How many can any particular group of people have? And so on.

Notwithstanding my share in contributing to these misunderstandings,<sup>8</sup> I suggest that the turn to ontology in anthropology is not about offering some suitably improved and ontically fortified replacement for culture. Rather, it is about offering a better way to address just one of the questions “culture” was always supposed to absorb—namely, the analytical problem of how to make sense of things that seem to lack one (this is the most neutral way I have of defining the so-called problem of alterity). What do you do as an anthropologist when the people you study say that a stone is a person, or have performed sacrifices to maintain the supremacy of their king, or engage in any other activity or discourse that during an unguarded moment you would be tempted to call “irrational”? Culture provides an answer: you say that the people in question have different “beliefs” than you do. Ontology’s better answer is that if these things “appear irrational,” it is because we have misunderstood them. If people say that a stone is a person, it is because they are talking about something different from what we talk about when we say that it is not. So the difference in question is not one between two sides disagreeing about things but rather between two sides speaking about different things.

So, just to stake out my position in this conversation, let me list three reasons for which the move to ontology offers a better solution to the problem of alterity than culture does.

1. It gets us out of the problem of having to choose between “sides.” Where the culturalist’s take presents alterity as a disagreement about things (Stones are people! No, they’re not!), it forces upon us the question of who is right. The move to ontology gets you out of this false dilemma: if the two sides are talking about different things, then there is no disagree-

7. Note that one can certainly assert that particular people(s) have different “ontologies” in the sense that they may have different understandings of questions about the ultimate principles of existence—that is, that subset of their “culture” that deals with big metaphysical questions (cosmology, cosmogony, philosophy, etc.). But this does not amount to replacing “culture” with “ontology”; rather, it places the latter within the circle of the former.

8. For example, in talking carelessly about “native ontologies” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007:23) or about how people inhabit different “worlds” rather than “worldviews” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 10–12)—a particularly reifying expression.



ment to be decided upon. Stones can both be and not be persons if what counts as a stone in either case is different.

2. A corollary of this is remarked upon more rarely and has to do with the way the ontological move actually protects both sides in the putative disagreement. Proponents of the move usually emphasize how it gets us out of the arrogance of thinking that the people we study are silly when they say and do things that to us seem irrational. But equally it gets us out of the relativist impulse to say that what we consider rational is "just as" open to question (equally "situated," "constructed," and so on). Our anthropological desire to give credit to those who seem to be saying (because we misunderstand them) that stones are people has no bearing on our own commonsense understanding that they are not: again, what counts as a stone in either case is different. The ontological turn, in other words, protects our "science" and our "common sense" as much as it protects the "native." From an anthropological point of view, problems arise only when scientific and/or commonsense assumptions are used as a baseline in attempts to address problems of alterity—a form of ontological category mistake that Evans-Pritchard (1937) was perhaps the first to recognize when he argued notoriously that Zande magic and Western common sense are not in competition with each other since they each address different kinds of questions ("why" things happen at a particular time to a particular person, as opposed to "how" they were caused).

3. The move to ontology is more imaginative than talking about differences in beliefs and so on. For consider the challenge: if the problem when people say that stones are persons is to understand what they are actually saying (as opposed to why they may be saying such a silly thing), then the onus is on me as an anthropologist to reconceptualize a whole host of notions that are involved in such a statement. I have to literally rethink what a stone and what a person might be for the equation of one with the other to even make sense. To the extent that such anthropological challenges speak to very basic conceptual issues (the distinction between materiality and humanity, the notion of identity and difference, etc.), the ontological move allows us to have a stake in these issues as much as any other discipline, including, particularly, philosophy, from which we tend to borrow more than we contribute. The image I like to hold on to is one in which differences between the way people get on with their lives (although only some of them) translate into differences in the ways that we, as anthropologists, may think (see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). I can think of no more creative prospect for my profession!

### An Ontological Approach: A Question of Aims and Practices

While each of you employed a different vocabulary, you all considered the question of ontology in relation to culture and/or alterity, whether as part of the disciplines' meta-narratives or in relation to various pasts, the fieldwork en-

counter, or the production of new pasts. Witmore underscores the metaphysical distinction between a "common ontology" of substance within archaeology and a process-relational alternative that admits relations into the compositional reality of things. The possibility of these different ontologies lies behind the question, is there one reality or many? Against any presumption of archaeologists claiming things exclusively for themselves and the background of whether archaeology has made a theoretical contribution to a wider transdisciplinary debate around ontology, Fowles suggests that archaeologists might more profitably return to the big questions, the grand narratives of human antiquity in light of ontological concerns. Marshall emphasizes the liveliness of the encounter with both humans and nonhumans, suggesting that we can be influenced by our "objects" the way anthropologists "take on" other cultures if we make such relations ontologically equivalent in our theories. In his contribution, Alberti stresses the opening up of alterity that ontology enables if it is left as a question or provocation to conceptualize something new. In turn, Holbraad argues that ontology offers a better solution to alterity than culture does. Clearly, "ontology" for him is not "just" another word for "culture"; ontology is more productive precisely when in the vicinity of alterity.

But what does an ontological perspective of alterity involve? Is the goal then to better describe "the" real world? Concomitantly, is "one reality" our common starting point? Furthermore, even if we begin with a presumption of multiple realities, do we not simply generate a new rule book for a plural reality and thus retreat again into a single authoritative account of how the world and past actually exist? In short, where does one begin with an ontological approach?

#### *Yvonne Marshall*

The limitation in shifting from a starting point that proposes a single ontology to a starting point of multiple ontologies is that such a move is additive rather than transformative. It is, as has often been observed, a pop-bead approach to alterity (Spelman 1988). We can keep adding more and more pop beads to account for each kind of alterity, but there will never be an end point to our string. Furthermore, no matter how many additions we make, the new beads will never transform the original one because each pop bead is understood to be an irreducible entity—fixed and bounded—or, to use Witmore's words, a "persistent, intractable, stable substance." For me, this assumption of fixity is the crux of the alterity problem, not the number of pop beads in our string. Alterity demands a transformative move that makes it possible for our original bead to engage with but not encompass all the other beads that we might imagine adding to our string. A truly transformative ontology can therefore be neither one nor many, neither singular nor multiple, but it must be in some way relational. As I see it, all five of us are exploring the implications for our work of thinking through such a relational ontology, but we have chosen different avenues—

Latour, Viveiros de Castro, Harman, Grosz, Strathern, Barad. In this brief look at how we might move toward relational alterity, I will sketch two theoretical “miniatures,” one from Strathern and the other from Barad.

The first miniature is Marilyn Strathern’s (1991) article “One Man and Many Men.” She offered this paper in the context of a workshop held in response to Godelier’s proposition that the societies of Melanesia break along a fault line, that there are “two alternative logics of society”: big-men societies where power, status, and wealth are built up through competitive exchange, and great-men societies where exchange is more restricted but ritual initiation, particularly of boys into manhood, is highly elaborated (Godelier 1986). A key correlate of this division is a difference in notions of equivalence and nonequivalence. In big-men societies, women are transferred against bridewealth, and wealth can compensate for the killing of a man in warfare. In great-men societies, only women can be exchanged for women, and the only appropriate response to a homicide is a return death.

In the course of the workshop, the nature of the proposed alterity began to shift so that the “dimensions along which we sought to differentiate societies turned out in many cases to be discernable axes of differentiation within societies” (Godelier and Strathern 1991:xiv). What was originally proposed as two principles by which societies could be typologized into separate categories seemed now to pervade most if not all Melanesian societies, although elaborated in different ways. Alterity moved from an external axis of differentiation to an internal, intrarelational accounting of diversity. Strathern’s paper takes a step further. Drawing on her work with the Hagen, a big-men society, she argues that when women or men are exchanged or substituted for wealth, it appears that an equivalence is asserted between persons and things, but this is not the case. Equivalence does not lie in the equation of two kinds of stable entities (persons and things) but rather in their effects or capacities (a woman’s reproductive capacity, the capacity of wealth to produce wealth). It is not fixed, bounded, intractable entities that are transacted and between which a logic of equivalence is drawn but an internal differentiating capacity or effect. The initially external axis of alterity—big-men versus great-men societies—is not only internal to specific societies but is also internal to persons, objects, and their capacities, including big men and great men.

One is a figure who holds within his own will a precariously demonstrated capacity for unification in the face of external relations, while the other is one conduit among many who hold between them the powers necessary to accomplish equally hazardous internal divisions. (Strathern 1991:214)

In the course of this workshop, one specific axis of alterity is transformed from external to internal, from a fixed entity to a relational capacity, and is shown to be neither context nor scale specific. Finally, what holds these differing logics of Melanesian society apart, what separates and makes their al-

terities visible, is chronological sequencing or “temporal non-equivalence” (Strathern 1991:211). In practice, alterities cannot be made manifest as a single entity; their making is not and cannot be simultaneous.

My second miniature is Karen Barad’s (2003, 2007) account of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which forms part of her argument for a relational ontology—“agential realism.” Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle is the conundrum that an electron (or other object) has both position and momentum, properties that are conventionally understood to be inherent attributes of electrons and objects, yet they cannot be simultaneously determined (Barad 2003:814). While position and momentum are understood to be always and simultaneously present, because they require mutually exclusive measuring apparatuses—“one requiring fixed parts and the complementary arrangement requiring moveable parts” (Barad 2003:814)—the two attributes cannot be measured at the same time. We cannot know them simultaneously. In other words (in Strathern’s language), position and momentum are two capacities of an object with specific effects; they are not fixed attributes intrinsic to an object. Two internal alterities are held apart by their engagement with two different but specific and exclusionary “apparatuses of bodily production” (Barad 2003:814). These can be engaged only sequentially, not simultaneously, so in practice only one of the two effects can be made and made visible at any one time. As in the Melanesian example, alterity is shown to be internal.

My two miniatures, one social and one physical, are in different ways arguments for a relational ontology as a starting point. They break us out of Holbraad’s problem of “choosing between sides” and make it possible for stones to be people because they open the possibility that stones and people have, within some specific arrangement of the world, capacities in common without them having to be fully self-identical or even, more simply, equivalent. In their focus on specific, singular capacities or effects rather than on stable substances, my two miniatures produce, to use Alberti’s language, the possibility of a new conceptual understanding of “things”—hopefully all of Fowles’s “things.” And yes, I do hope that by taking a relational ontology as a starting point we are better able to describe our world—past or present, anthropological or archaeological (Boric 2010:282)—but not in the sense of edging ever closer to an accurate account of an object or past, more in Holbraad’s sense that differences in the way people get on with their lives translate into differences in the way that we, as archaeologists, think the past. So as archaeologists we aspire to acknowledge and celebrate the way in which archaeological subjects defy description and to use their challenges as vantage points for examining and understanding difference (Holbraad 2009:439).

*Ben Alberti*

How you conceive of ontology or ontologies and what it is you want to do with an ontological approach are clearly in-

separable. Theories and "ontogenies" (see Fowles's comments) that challenge the ontological status quo of contemporary academic inquiry—the "common ontology," as Witmore puts it—are essential. But multi- or pluriverses—ontologies that stand side by side—sound like culture in the guise of ontology; this is the pop-bead or additive approach critiqued by Marshall (see Alberti and Marshall 2009; Venkatesan 2010). Holbraad's response to this dilemma is to apportion a part of what culture covers, the problem of alterity, to ontology. Alternatively, being attentive to the relational ontologies themselves may reveal the issue to be a red herring: as Witmore points out, the notion of "stable substances" that underwrites the pop-bead worry hardly applies to relational theories that specifically challenge independent objects or enduring essences. An issue remains, however—is "ontology," then, merely another word for "world" or "physical reality"? The force of ontology is the attention it focuses on "being" or "reality" as distinct from the epistemological foundations of the culture concept. My position is that once a relational ontology has been introduced, then by its very nature it challenges any attempt to erect barriers between something that can be called the real, material, or physical world and something else that can be called thought, discourse, or narrative. There is no position of externality. This does not mean that objective, comparative knowledge is not possible (see Barad 2007), but it simply makes that effort one of internal rather than external differentiation (see Marshall's comments).

Barad, Latour, and the other theorists we draw from have in common a commitment to a world in which ontology is a shifting ground, not a foundation. The "actual world" can stabilize, but its form is never pregiven. It is important to have theories of how realities are concretely produced because such theories work as alternatives only if we can pin down the material processes involved. Marshall illustrates this point when she argues for a trench that really does push back, not one toward which we act as if it were pushing back. There are good, pragmatic reasons for siding with these complex theories of world creation. They provide the parameters of possibility for which questions will be taken seriously. Convincing intelligent detractors trained in the sophisticated ways of Western scientific thinking—or the rest of us whose consciousnesses were shaped by rote science lessons in school—that the world is neither flat nor round but topologically various requires allies.

There is, however, a fly in the ointment, one that appears at precisely the moment that a new rule book for "the way(s) in which . . . the world actually exists" (Witmore) is drafted. That fly is alterity. Even if superior in some objective sense to ontologies that posit a singular universe, relational ontologies still follow a set of rules about how the world really is—Barad's (2007) world-creating formula is a case in point. But if we replace one theory with another as our a priori, then are we not closing down relationality at the level of theory? What I want to do with ontology (get at alterity

archaeologically) requires that our new metaontologies be treated with as much skepticism as they themselves show toward any durable entity. Once alterity is introduced as a conundrum, then any self-contained theory (ontology) is open to critique. Witmore (forthcoming *a*) argues elsewhere that ontologically oriented methodologies must be locally induced. So too must our ontologies at their very foundations be open to the challenge of alterity—the thing that just does not make sense within the terms of the theory.

When we deploy any theory wholesale, we run the risk of ignoring recursivity, which, in archaeology's case, is demanded of us by both our material encounters and our use of ethnography—the "two-way regard" is theoretical and physical (see Marshall's comments). A cautious critic might ask, for instance, whether Witmore's compositional approach can "find" things that challenge its framework. Or is the theory brought to the material with its concepts ready-formed, different in kind from the thing it encounters? Clearly, as he demonstrates in no uncertain terms here and elsewhere (e.g., Witmore 2006, forthcoming *a*), these theories are particularly good at enabling certain types of analysis forbidden by conventional ontologies. The issue, then, is not the new terrain opened up by such theories but that they can produce "new realities" only within their own terms. The theories' foundational ontological commitments are not necessarily challenged. Things can be redescribed, but can the archaeological encounter surprise the theory?

Alterity can therefore be held in obeisance, even in relational ontologies. To free it requires "supple, mild, even fluid concepts" (Bergson 1999 [1912]:30; see also Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). To illustrate, I defend small-scale studies against Fowles's concerns. The type of ontological inquiry I am advocating means beginning with specific things, in my case pots that defy representational logic<sup>9</sup> (see the figures in Alberti and Marshall 2009). The conundrum (read: alterity) of the pots when diffracted through theory suggests a general principle—that of "radical procedural equivalence" (see Viveiros de Castro 2003, 2004*b*). The principle is a product of my encounter with the material. Barad (2007) argues that identity is constituted relationally and performatively, and, taking the antihuman exceptionalism tenant at full value, identities are not limited to humans. Some pots betray tattoo-like markings, piercing, bodies manipulated—that is, an equivalence is established between human and pot, body and pot. There are certain geometric regularities among the pots, a sphere shape that reappears and out of which body parts or biomorphs extend or push. According to Barad (2007), the world must interpret itself—make determinate one part in relation to another—independently of "us." The equivalence suggested by the theory and in the material is not an identity between things but an identity of practice. One could argue that all things act toward each other in the same

9. From the La Candelaria archaeological culture, first millennium CE, northwest Argentina.

way—a practice-based theory of world formation (see Alberti and Marshall 2009).

In keeping with the terms of the principle itself, it must turn on all relations in its vicinity. The result is an archaeological “thing” (in Witmore’s sense) that operates on different ontological ground than a conventional archaeological object, motivated by a principle that refuses to allow any element involved to have a privileged relationship to any other. La Candelaria belief about their ontology in relation to their pots, for instance, is no different in kind from our theories about their ontology. That is, this is not a “model” of a past ontology in which all things were believed by the locals to obey the same ontological principles (i.e., “their ontology”).

The key point is that whatever principle or notion comes out of reading this literature in relation to these pots is internal to the interpretation of the pots rather than the description of an external force acting on the pots (such as “time,” “change,” “culture,” and so on). Holbraad (2010; see also 2007) has made a similar point much more persuasively in relation to “change” and the practice of Ifá: change emerges as a “constitutive feature of things” in this particular case rather than obeying a theory external to the case itself. In keeping with my claim that ontology undermines any a priori structures of difference, realities become determinate through processes of internal differentiation in which all elements of the puzzle are subject to the “emergent” rules.

I agree with Marshall that we are after more adequate descriptions; for archaeology, the challenge is to push things to push back, to require new descriptions of us. Holbraad’s “apparently irrational beliefs” must first be recognized in the archaeological material itself, which is preferable to continuing to import our unintelligibility from anthropology in the form of exotic analogies. Theories drive the possibilities, but they are not postulates separate in kind, immune to the interpretive exercise or their objects. In this sense, I would like to avoid our new things turning into another “immutable metaphysic” (Holbraad 2010). A full definition of ontology may not be possible or desirable if it is to play the role of a provocation to difference.

What seems to have happened here is that my theoretical commentary has become an example of my “case study” rather than the other way round. But perhaps that is the point.

#### *Severin Fowles*

I will be frank and admit, first, that as an archaeological anthropologist I am not interested in speculating about multiple realities; I am happy to leave this to physicists and philosophers. Second, I am of the opinion that gaining critical perspective on the insidious influence of our existing great divides—crucially, the premodern versus modern, nonhuman versus human, and nature versus culture divides—is sufficiently massive an intellectual challenge that we need not make things harder for ourselves by creating more and even

greater divides, which is precisely what talk of multiple ontologies seems to aspire to in its pluralization of worlds. My simple answer, then, is that I find it most useful to begin with the premise that there is one world, one relational field of encounter with a very uneven terrain, but one in which all things nevertheless have the potential to materially impact all other things.

That said, the question we have been given invites us to consider this issue as it relates to the more specific problem of alterity. In doing so, we are prompted to weigh in on the suggestion recently made by Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (2007; see also Alberti and Bray 2009; Holbraad 2009) that anthropologists, in their encounters with others, have the option of examining alterity as either an epistemological or an ontological phenomenon. Either we treat alterity as a matter of different beliefs (where seemingly irrational practices are chalked up to different cultural understandings of a single world, inhabited by Western and non-Western peoples alike) or we treat it as a matter of different worlds (where seemingly irrational non-Western practices become rational once we acknowledge that the practitioners occupy a separate ontological space in which the basic categories of being and systems of causality are fundamentally different than they are in our Western world). In short, anthropologists may accept either that their ethnographic subjects think differently about things or that they have entirely different things to think about. The former approach, we are told, eats up other peoples’ worlds by turning them into mere worldviews—into different cultures that irrationally misrepresent a scientifically defined nature to a greater or lesser degree. The latter approach is then offered as a corrective. By granting ethnographic subjects their own worlds, Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell argue, we not only avoid explaining away non-Western alterity, we also unleash the power of ontological inquiry to push anthropological theory forward.

Were we to take Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell’s ontological approach seriously, we would surely be looking at an unorthodox anthropological project. Anthropology is conventionally understood as striking a balance between the dual goals of making the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar unfamiliar. As we come to appreciate the internal logics of very different cultural positionalities, we denaturalize our own set of norms and commitments, which come to be seen as one among many possible ways of being in the world. Denaturalization, then, emerges as a critical project designed to open up space for reimagining and reinventing the anthropologist’s own society. In contrast, the approach of those advocating for “multiple ontologies” is very different. Their goal is to make the unfamiliar even more unfamiliar by undermining the possibility of using Western ontological categories to shed light on non-Western settings (and vice versa, presumably). And it is by radicalizing unfamiliarity—by radicalizing alterity—that they suggest we will be jolted out of our alleged anthropological complacency, our eyes newly opened to the infinite plurality of worlds and analytical frames.

There are many issues to deal with here, but in the interest of space I want to briefly comment on the notion of "ethnographic encounter" (and, by extension, archaeological encounter), which is central to the argument just summarized. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (2007) rely heavily upon this notion in their discussion of how the experience of alterity can generate new ontological possibilities, and their root premise is that ethnographic encounters can be neutral, innocent, and approached "with purposeful naïveté, the aim of this method [being] to take 'things' encountered in the field as they present themselves" (2). These days, the desire for innocent or unmediated encounters with others—be they human or nonhuman others—is widespread. Indeed, "naïveté" has been explicitly valorized as a methodological goal by a great range of recent authors variously involved in the ontological turn (e.g., Appadurai 1986; Brown 2004; Latour 2005; Mitchell 2005). But we must ask ourselves whether such methodological naïveté is ever really possible in an ethnographic encounter. Is it possible, for instance, to develop a research proposal, secure a grant, travel to a foreign place, observe members of an impoverished and formerly colonized community, return, and report to one's peers about how the natives' world works—is it possible to do all this innocently? Have we not had enough of naive belief in naive encounter? Needless to say, the same applies to the archaeological encounter with artifacts, which are always surveyed, dug up, brushed off, mapped, and (consequently) enframed objects of inquiry before they are interpreted as anything else. Here is where I deviate from the positions of Alberti and Marshall: to my mind, an artifact could never possess a radical alterity precisely because it remains an "artifact."

The crux of this observation can be generalized. Every encounter—ethnographic, archaeological, or otherwise—exists within the tangled circuitry of a shared world rather than as a spark that jumps across a gap between worlds. Alterity is never a dissonance between two autonomous cultures any more than it is a dissonance between two autonomous ontologies. Decades of postcolonial critiques should by now have sensitized us to this fact. Indeed, while one might argue that self and other are always mutually constitutive, it goes without saying that colonialism, capitalism, industrialization, international warfare, and worldwide environmental degradation have heightened the global interpenetration of people and things to an extent that is simply impossible to ignore.

Consequently, ontological claims increasingly double as political action. Consider a highly popularized but nevertheless poignant example: when the Kogi in northern Colombia offered their cosmological commentary to the BBC in the early 1990s, they did so to explicitly critique a Western ontology they felt was destroying a world that was not just Western but Kogi as well (Ereira 1992). It was the singularity of the earth that made the destructive industrialization of the West impossible to ignore, even for an allegedly isolated tribe hiding in its secluded mountain home. Of course, one could examine the ontological claims of the Kogi *mamas*, or priests, in an

attempt to expose their autonomous logic and internal rationality; one could attempt to resolve their seemingly irrational claims that "the Mother" is at once the immanent physical earth as well as the intelligence or mind that created the earth, or their claims that material objects are condensed information, or their apparent conflation of weaving and morality (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978:9–14). But one would be completely missing the point if one ignored the fact that these claims simultaneously exist in dialogue with—and in creative opposition to—Western ontological claims. For their part, the Kogi realize this perfectly well; this, presumably, is why they situate their ontological critiques within a broader relational field occupied by "Elder Brothers" (the Kogi) and "Younger Brothers" (Westerners). "Ontological commitments," observes Stephen White (2000), "are . . . entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively" (n. 3). I suggest that this is where we begin.

It is also where I suggest we end. As I see it, the problem with going further and adopting ontological pluralization as an anthropological methodology is that this move ends up being so ironically, tragically, and embarrassingly modern. Stripped to its core, our modernist ontology is inseparable from what we might call the exceptional position of nonposition. Whatever the world is, there must always be some position of nonposition outside it for the Western liberal subject to occupy, as reason stands apart from emotion, mind from body, referee from players, scientist from experiments, anthropologist from natives. In this sense, there is nothing more profoundly modern than the effort to step outside modernity. And this is precisely what the advocates of the ontological turn claim to have accomplished twice over: first by standing in the position of nonposition vis-à-vis other people's worlds and second by standing in the position of nonposition vis-à-vis the plurality of worlds itself. Modernity squared.

#### *Martin Holbraad*

My response to the first question generates immediate responses to this second one. The goal of an ontological take on the problem of alterity cannot be to "describe the real world" if by that we mean what we usually mean—namely, the aim of finding representations that correctly describe reality. The problem of alterity, I suggested, emerges precisely when even our best attempts at representation fail. The ontological move provides a way out of this predicament by displacing the problem: when our attempts to represent our anthropological material fail, making it "appear irrational," the problem becomes one of reconceptualizing it. Instead of using our concepts as "representations" of our material, then, we use our material to transform our concepts (although see the below on the role of representational criteria in this analytical procedure).

Now, while the ontological character of this tack of arguing is unequivocal, it is also to be understood in precise terms—

terms that may serve to distinguish it from a swarm of otherwise kindred antirepresentationist and ontologically inflected arguments that have been advanced in recent years and that have been invoked by others in our discussion (e.g., Barad, Ingold, Harman, Latour, Whitehead, etc.). The precision I have in mind derives directly from the particular analytical task to which this version of antirepresentationism is designed to respond—namely and precisely, to respond to a particular analytical task (i.e., the specific analytical challenges posed by the problem of alterity). So its precision lies in its strictly methodological character. The putative dilemma posed in the question, between taking one “reality” or many as the starting point for analysis, provides a useful reference for understanding what is at stake in this claim to methodology.

In may appear that the antirepresentationism of the move to ontology is slanted toward the idea that there are many realities to reckon with rather than one. After all, as I explained earlier, the very thrust of this move is away from parsing alterity as a disagreement between (many) competing representations of (one) reality and toward thinking of it as the misunderstanding that ensues when (many) different (and therefore noncompeting) real things are mistaken as representational versions of one. But does this methodological injunction amount to a metaphysical commitment? In particular, does the core suggestion that alterity arises when the analyst’s concepts are inadequate to the material he or she seeks to understand (i.e., ontological divergence) imply an ontology of multiple realities?

I suggest that it does not, if by that we understand “an authoritative account of how the world exists.” For alterity, on this rendition, pertains to the relationship between analysis and its objects (namely, anthropological concepts and the ethnographic or archaeological materials brought to bear on them) and not per se to how some bits of the world(s) relate (or not) to others, which I take to be a metaphysical issue best left to philosophers. Of course, we all get into philosophical moods. When in such a mood, one may want to ask what metaphysical implications the methodology of ontological divergence between analysis and its object might have. For example, one might want to say that, since analysis too is clearly a worldly activity, whatever methodological moves one makes will have a bearing on one’s metaphysics. And one might want then to ask whether a world that contains within it the kinds of cleavages our ontologically inflected methodology posits is best conceptualized as being single or multiple, as per our question.

All this is fine. But my firm insistence is that it is nevertheless extraneous to the anthropological methodology it seeks philosophically to illuminate. Simply put: I do not need to have an opinion on the ultimate principles of reality in order to say that when my informants feed a stone with blood they are feeding something different from what I take the stone to be when I assume it cannot be thirsty or hungry for it.

What I do need to have, however, is a clear account of how

my methodology is supposed to work. In the epigrammatic spirit of our short exchanges, let me close by adapting a section from my forthcoming book (which is partly about these questions; Holbraad 2012), where I gloss the approach as a species of “ontography”—a term that also serves to distinguish it from the kinds of ontological concerns in which philosophers might engage (see also Holbraad 2008). The method of ontography can be conveyed in a tongue-in-cheek stepwise pedagogy.

*Step 1.* Describe your ethnographic and archaeological material as well as you can, using all the concepts at your disposal to represent it as accurately as possible. Use ordinary representational criteria of truth to judge the accuracy of your descriptions: match them with the facts as you found them in the field.

*Step 2.* Scan your descriptions for logical contradictions. Occasions in which your descriptions tempt you to say that your informants are being “irrational” are good candidates for logical scrutiny. When you can show the contradictions involved, you have identified “alterity.”

*Step 3.* Specify the conceptual conflicts that generate the contradictions. Which concepts are involved? What are the associated assumptions, corollaries, concomitants, consequences, and so on? How do they relate to the more transparent and logically unproblematic parts of your description? Answering these questions provides you with the heuristic tools you will need for the following step.

*Step 4.* Experiment with redefining in different ways the concepts that generate contradictions. Ask questions of the forms, What if  $x$  were thought of as . . . ? What does  $y$  need to be in order that . . . ? Modify the meanings of your concepts by bringing them into different relationships with each other. Your criterion of truth is the logical cogency of your redefinitions. This involves two minimum requirements: (a) that your redefinitions remove the contradictions that motivate them and (b) that they do not generate new ones in relation to other parts of your descriptions of your material.

*NB.* While the concepts that you are redefining in these ways are derived from your (variously [un]successful) descriptions of the ethnographic or archaeological materials, responsibility for your acts of reconceptualization is your own. Your material will not give you the answers, only the terms with which to generate them. Feel free to draw on fellow anthropologists, philosophers, and other thinkers for inspiration and comparison.

*Step 5.* The litmus test for gauging the success of your ontographic analytical experiment is its transparency with respect to your material. This means that, while your claim to truth regarding your conceptualizations resides in their logical cogency, the final test they have to pass is representational (which is not equivalent to saying that the final goal of the exercise is an act of representation, as per the above): if and only if your conceptual redefinitions allow you to articulate true representations of the phenomena whose description initially mired you in contradiction, your work is done.

*Christopher Witmore*

The short answer to the question of where we begin is *in medias res*. To begin in the midst of things, for me, is to place to one side those predetermined dramas that play out between humans and the world.<sup>10</sup> In this, as Alberti suggests, ontology is not something that can be applied. Worse than succumbing to a common fallacy of reverting into epistemology (see Viveiros de Castro 1999), such an attempt amounts to forcing an abstraction upon reality at the expense of what is encountered in experience. This is part of why "ontology" cannot be just another word for "culture," whatever one means by this term. As to where one goes from here, I have found some metaphysical propositions to be helpful guides. Allow me to briefly enumerate a few of these.

Although an admittedly awkward term, "symmetry" is a principle and attitude that challenges us not to assume the nature of relations between, for example, a ruined tower, a former cardinal's family, or the Via Appia Antica Park Authority by imposing an asymmetric scheme based upon a discord between intentional social players and objective matter. There is no fixed gap between humans and other actors in the world, and the notion of symmetry simply reminds us to place all participants in a given situation on the same footing at the start rather than decide in advance what role various entities play (Callon 1986). A second principle is irreduction. Reiterating a point made by Marshall, no entity can ever fully encapsulate another (Latour 1988). If we accept that it is an inclination of all entities to resist face-to-face interactions, then all differences count for something. With this point follows a third principle, the democratic—relations are a problem for all entities, and anything can be a potential mediator in their negotiation. For me, these propositions are merely signposts that help us follow local interactions wherever they may lead.

Do these propositions agree with reality? One can never definitively pin this one down. We can only endeavor to establish whether they agree with our observations of the material world. These observations play out on a stage where the matter "observed is important when present, and sometimes is absent" (Whitehead 1978 [1929]:4); thus, they are situated within a perpetual process of distinguishing signal from noise whether in the course of kneeling on sore knees while feeling with the edge of a trowel or gazing at a picture of a ruined tower from a distance of less than a meter (Witmore 2009). These observations, I hasten to add, never speak directly but unfold through a number of steps along a chain of engagement brimming with other interlocutors (Witmore 2004; Yarrow 2003).

In this, do we begin with the presumption of multiple

10. The Latin word *res* designates a range of associations: property, entities, things, the physical world, deeds, exploits, a matter of speech, a concern, a matter at hand, an event. This range of meaning helps with understanding how what I take to be things are much more variegated and far more interesting.

realities? Let us say, for the sake of argument, yes. Upon these grounds we grant to all the dignity of taking their world seriously without relegating it to a secondary position undergirded by a primary and ready-made world of facts (some of the associated benefits of this move have already been discussed by Holbraad). However, in so doing we must prevail against an ontological bazaar sustained by apathy or lack of conviction. What is your ontology? For me, the aim here has been about neither coming to agreement over what constitutes the blueprint of the world nor claiming some privilege over things; rather, the aim has been to arrive at a richer understanding of the ways by which the world actually exists and the place of the past therein. At the end of the day, I cannot claim that one understanding is more real than the other. I regard this as less of a "pop-bead problem" than as one of many orientations around matters of common interest. That each orientation generates a different thing, as Holbraad points out, should not keep us from attempting to prevail upon a common world.

The best examples of anthropological labor refuse to stop short of the ways by which the world really exists. This too can be said of the best of archaeological practices. A member of Durham University Archaeological Services would never claim to have uncovered a "house" before the requisite work had been put into arriving at that potential outcome. Although not always explicitly engaged at an ontological level (or in print, as many of the best debates occur during fieldwork), archaeology has long struggled with defining what it holds to be fundamental entities (e.g., Clarke 1968; Dunnell 1986; Lucas, forthcoming), and, whether others choose to engage in this debate, it will continue to do so in light of the goals of the profession (Olsen et al. 2012). Metaphysical questions are far from new to archaeology, and ontological debates are necessary for the profession's ongoing formation (consider, e.g., Karlsson 2005). Probing for alternatives to the common metaphysical angles on, for example, distinctions between universals and particulars, words and the world, past and present, and primary and secondary qualities have tremendous utility for the empirical craft of archaeology. At the same time, the ontological turn poses enormous challenges in terms of how archaeologies understand the realities of the past (Witmore, forthcoming *b*).

Fowles's caricature of proprietorial archaeologists claiming things for themselves is problematic precisely because it is far too idiosyncratic to sum up a common disciplinary attitude—not that I believe this to have been his intent.<sup>11</sup> Still, returning

11. I agree with Fowles that, in some cases, publicity has outstripped purpose with respect to the question of ontology in archaeology—this is certainly true of many other debates. The implication, however, is that archaeologists have added little to a debate supposedly taking place "elsewhere"—this simply reaffirms the old inferiority complex whereby practitioners import the wares of other "forerunner" disciplines. Such objections, voiced many times throughout the history of archaeology, are rendered null and void on the metaphysical grounds we are discussing here.

to the question of contribution, I cannot help but ponder how, if air, coffee cups, hammers, microbes, rocks, scallops, or Cleopatra's Needle can add to this debate at a transdisciplinary level, then why not the humble things coproduced through the ecology of practices covered by the moniker "archaeology"? Ask Quentin Meillassoux (2008) how he can endeavor to grasp the philosophical problem of "ancestrality"; ask Peter Sloterdijk (2009) how he can trace the history of architecture back to the primordial conditions of the savanna; ask Graham Harman (2009a) how he can be so certain of an infinite regression of objects in the world were it not for the labor of archaeology and anthropology. While I acknowledge that I am straying somewhat off the target from Fowles's comments, sooner or later even philosophers, whether empirically oriented or not, read books and articles impacted by anthropological and archaeological achievement. Indeed, that archaeology has already contributed to the ontological turn is an artifact of Fowles's well-made point concerning the big stories of human antiquity. Yet how can an arbitrary hierarchy of value, which sorts out "forerunner disciplines" from so-called secondary ones, do justice to radically different modes of production? It cannot.

Again, all differences count for something, and ontological concerns are not derivative of debates occurring somewhere else if they lead to fresh angles on what we should be attentive to in experience. We, as practitioners, do not operate under a separate set of guidelines; we too are part of this world that we seek to better understand.

## Concluding Comments

The overall conversation has produced many new questions, questions that are both challenging and fundamental to our practices as anthropologists and archaeologists. In her response to the second question, Marshall provided two vignettes that engage the work of Strathern and Barad and emphasize the power of a relational ontology as a starting point in challenging and understanding difference. Alberti questions the positioning of a relational ontology as a starting point on the grounds that it establishes yet another a priori rule book for how things operate in a given situation. As a way toward registering the impact of alterity, he advocates localized studies through which ontological difference is allowed to emerge without assuming a position of detachment or exteriority. Against any speculation concerning the pluralization of worlds, Fowles defends one world as a common starting point with the proviso that practitioners work toward critical and productive alternatives to what were formally held to be fundamental divides. For Holbraad, concepts should not provide a path through materials; rather, it is the materials that should transform our concepts. However, for such dissonance to occur one requires a methodology, what Holbraad calls ontography, the process of which he lays out in five steps. Finally, for Witmore the real world is neither necessarily one nor many, but to make the cut ahead of time is to fail to

grasp our positions as part of the medium of the world. Not reducing the richness of experience is key—to this end, he develops a series of metaphysical propositions as guidelines for how to move toward locally unfolding modes of existence.

What turns out to be key, then, is how we even conceptualize ontology and difference. What is the relationship, for example, between the "real world" and a "common world"? For some of us, ontology describes modes of thought or conceptualizations of a singular real world, which may in some ways be reminiscent of Foucault's epistemes or Kuhn's paradigms (ontology as models of a separate, singular "reality"). For others among us, ontology goes deeper, incorporating materiality, matter, physicality itself as not prior but constituted by the situation described (ontology as "reality" and potentially multiply conceived). For the former, comparability is about recognizing objects in common; for the later, it might be about recognizing what makes the difference. Either way, ontology is about digging into reality rather than skating across its surface.<sup>12</sup>

Our mode of engaging these issues through discussion, debate, and negotiation fits well an immanent take on questions of ontology where the relationality of all our positions emerges through our exchange. In a sense, the form of the debate begins to encapsulate some of its content: ontology conceived nonessentially, as a moving project, as in some ways embedded within the different positions—that is, as relational. This debate, we suggest, has a recursive relationship to those concerns that it discusses. Necessarily it will continue as the generation of a dialogue in which positions coemerge in their relation to one another rather than in relation to fixed or idealized objects elsewhere (cf. Marshall, forthcoming; Strathern 1988).

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the other participants of the "Worlds Otherwise" session (Sandy Budden, Visa Immonen, Benjamin Manktelow, Eleanor Harrison-Buck, Alejandro Haber, and Oliver Harris) and to several members of the audience (including Alfredo González-Ruibal) for helping to generate such a lively conversation at the 2010 Theoretical Archaeology Group conference at Brown University. In no small way, this exchange encouraged the authors to continue the conversation. We are also grateful to seven anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

12. Reviewers' comments encouraged us to think about the relationship of our work to postcolonial concerns in the discipline—is our conversation an example of a new means of colonizing difference through disciplinary structures? Even though not addressed directly (except, perhaps, by Fowles), this is not a foregone conclusion. In a larger conversation, we do explicitly move to questions of ontological colonization (Viveiros de Castro 2003) and archaeology and anthropology's complicity. How does one write about ontologies or alterity without incorporating or domesticating the same?



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