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# Relational Identities and Other-Than-Human Agency in Archaeology

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# Relational Identities and Other-Than-Human Agency in Archaeology

## **Description**

*Relational Identities and Other-than-Human Agency in Archaeology* explores the benefits and consequences of archaeological theorizing on and interpretation of the social agency of nonhumans as relational beings capable of producing change in the world. The volume cross-examines traditional understanding of agency and personhood, presenting a globally diverse set of case studies that cover a range of cultural, geographical, and historical contexts.

Agency (the ability to act) and personhood (the reciprocal qualities of relational beings) have traditionally been strictly assigned to humans. In case studies from Ghana to Australia to the British Isles and Mesoamerica, contributors to this volume demonstrate that objects, animals, locations, and other nonhuman actors also potentially share this ontological status and are capable of instigating events and enacting change. This kind of other-than-human agency is not a one-way transaction of cause to effect but requires an appropriate form of reciprocal engagement indicative of relational personhood, which in these cases, left material traces detectable in the archaeological record.

Modern dualist ontologies separating objects from subjects and the animate from the inanimate obscure our understanding of the roles that other-than-human agents played in past societies. *Relational Identities and Other-than-Human Agency in Archaeology* challenges this essentialist binary perspective. Contributors in this volume show that intersubjective (inherently social) ways of being are a fundamental and indispensable condition of all personhood and move the debate in posthumanist scholarship beyond the polarizing dichotomies of relational versus bounded types of persons. In this way, the book makes a significant contribution to theory and interpretation of personhood and other-than-human agency in archaeology.

## **Keywords**

archaeology, nonhuman, agency, personhood

## **Disciplines**

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Archaeologists who engage in relational personhood and other-than-human agency, often characterized as a relational or ontological archaeology (Alberti 2016; Watts 2013a), variously identify as post-humanist, (neo-)materialist, non-representationalist, or realist, among other labels. Bruno Latour's (1993, 2013) work has been hugely influential among this diverse body of scholarship, recently labeled the "new ontological realism" (Gabriel 2015) or, alternatively, the "new materialist" archaeology (Thomas 2015). Generally speaking, these scholars reject the classic "humanist" divides, such as culture-nature, human-animal, and animate-inanimate (Watts 2013b:16). In studies of relational personhood, this so-called post-humanist approach is not anti-human but rather considers personhood more broadly to include both human and other-than-human beings, such as animals, plants, spirits, and inanimate things (Thomas 2002; Fowler 2004, 2016).

Some of the most prominent "problem domains" in studies of ontological archaeology involve agency and personhood. There is a long history of attention given to studies of relational personhood in archaeology (Brück 2001; Fowler 2004, 2016; Thomas 2002; Gillespie 2001; Wilkinson 2013, 2017, among others) and in recent years a burgeoning of literature focused specifically on object-based agencies, biographies, and itineraries (Gosden and Marshall 1999; Hodder 2012; Joyce and Gillespie 2015b; Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Mills and Walker 2008; Olsen 2010; Webmoor

*An Introduction to  
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and Witmore 2008, among others). This volume provides a global perspective on these two interrelated “problem domains”—agency and personhood—and adds to a growing body of archaeological literature that explores the regional variability and intricacies of agency and how this ontological status informs relational personhood (for other recent contributions, see Buchanan and Skousen 2015; Watts 2013a).

Agency is closely related to animacy—“an ontology in which objects and other nonhuman beings possess souls, life-force and qualities of personhood” (Brown and Walker 2008:297). Here we note the important point that agency and personhood (and therefore animacy) are not synonymous. In other words, while all things have the potential for agency, not all agents (including humans) are necessarily persons. As Hill (this volume) notes, while many things have agency—the ability to act—not all of them possess the capacity for reciprocity where social identity is a mutually constituted relationship, which defines personhood in many societies (Ingold 2006; see also Pauketat and Alt, this volume). While some gloss agency and animacy as the same, the studies presented here and elsewhere highlight important distinctions between these two terms that are not just semantic (Ingold 2013:248; Zedeño 2013:121). Timothy Ingold (2013:248) suggests that agency and animacy “pull in opposite directions,” with the former referencing the intention of humans and nonhumans and the latter involving attention, vitalism, growth, and becoming. Ingold (2013:248) concludes that the term “agency” is tied to cognitivism and should be replaced with animacy, which he defines as non-discursive or bodily experienced knowledge (cf. Budden and Sofaer 2009; Harrison-Buck, this volume). While many of the contributions in this volume deal explicitly with animacy, the term strictly references a being with a life force—a quality associated with personhood—and is not applicable to every agent, namely non-persons. In this volume we maintain the term “agency” because it allows contributors to appropriately characterize a broader array of actors, not just social beings but also the asocial entities.

The terms “other-than-human” and “nonhuman” are used interchangeably in the literature and in this volume to refer to relational (social) beings, such as animals, plants, objects, and spirits. Terms like “other-than-human” or “non-human” distinguish between biologically human beings and other beings. We recognize that in many ways such terms are problematic in that they perpetuate a false subject-object divide that does not accurately portray the shared ontological status between human and nonhuman beings (*sensu* Ingold 2013:247). Some, like Benjamin Alberti and Yvonne Marshall, question whether we can overcome this and other forms of “hypocrisy” in our theorizing of relational ontologies (Alberti and Marshall 2009), echoing the sentiments of Eduardo

Viveiros de Castro (2002) who suggests that “other peoples’ ontological commitments (their worlds) have been converted by anthropology into epistemologies (worldviews)” (Alberti and Marshall 2009:346). While the contributors of this volume are encouraged to explore ontological difference in their case studies, they also recognize the interpretative challenges and acknowledge that our modes of inquiry in archaeological anthropology are deeply rooted in Western ontologies and epistemologies. Despite these limitations, the wealth of ethnographic data on Amerindian and North Eurasian ontologies demonstrates the need for more expansive (*sensu* Hviding 1996) and non-anthropocentric views of who (or what) is a socially recognized person. Such studies emphasize to archaeologists working in these and other areas of the world the importance of considering the ontological status of nonhuman agency and personhood in our archaeological reconstructions of past societies, regardless of whether they are considered “animistic.”

## NONHUMAN AGENCY IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Nonhuman agency in the context of relational personhood is not a human projection of imagination onto things but rather a condition of being alive in the world (Ingold 2006:10). In its simplest form, *agency* is the capacity to act (Hill, this volume; Robb 2010:493), but definitions of agency vary considerably in a range of contexts (see Dobres and Robb 2000 for examples). In recent years the focus has turned to object-based agency, and in such cases agency “denotes the power of objects to shape human behavior and influence change” (Zedeño 2013:121; see also Brown and Walker 2008:297; Pauketat 2013:27). Studying the agency of nonhumans has also gained recent scholarly attention, expanding on material agency to include animals, organisms, and other tangible and intangible phenomena (Buchanan and Skousen 2015; Pauketat 2013; Watts 2013a). By expanding our understanding of agency to include nonhuman social actors, some advocate a *symmetrical* process in the construction of personhood (Malafouris 2013; Witmore 2007). The “principle of symmetry” suggests that personhood is not necessarily restricted to one type of entity (i.e., living biological human beings), and nonhumans “should not be regarded as ontologically distinct [from humans], as detached and separated entities, *a priori*” (Witmore 2007:546).

Current theoretical approaches to nonhuman agency in archaeology have been inspired by the writings of numerous scholars, including Bruno Latour (1993) and Karen Barad (2007), who consider all phenomena relational because in their studies of science and metaphysics “there is no *a priori* distinction

to be made between social and natural-biological relations in the first place” (Wilkinson 2013:419; for further discussion, see also Martin 2013 and contributions in Descola and Pálsson 1996). Although interest in understanding relations between all sorts of social actors has increased in recent decades, an anthropological recognition of nonhuman social actors can be traced back to the pioneering works of A. Irving Hallowell. Hallowell (1960) coined the term “other-than-human persons” to more accurately capture the scope and texture of Ojibwa ontology and worldview. In more recent scholarship, Timothy Ingold’s (1986, 2000, 2010, 2011) ecological phenomenology and his characterizations of an animic ontology (Ingold 1998, 2006), Morten Pedersen’s (2001) studies of North Asian indigenous ontologies, as well as Philippe Descola’s (1996) socialized naturalism and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (1998, 2004) perspectivism among Amerindian (Amazonian) groups have been influential in bringing the question of the ontological status of nonhuman agents as persons to the forefront of anthropological debate.

This volume explores the benefits and consequences for both archaeological theorizing and interpretation when we consider other-than-human agents as social actors who possess a life force—animacy—and qualities of personhood capable of producing change in the world (Alberti and Bray 2009; Brown and Walker 2008; Fowler 2016; Harrison-Buck 2012, 2015; Hendon 2010, 2012; Skousen and Buchanan 2015; Swenson 2015; Watts 2013b). To avoid homogenizing nonhuman agency and personhood as an identity formation, contributors in this volume examine these processes through a series of case studies in different temporal, geographic, and cultural contexts. Most of the studies presented in this volume deal with societies that are traditionally characterized as “animistic” or “totemic”; however, nonhuman agency and relational personhood are also invoked in modern contexts and are not necessarily restricted to any one type of society (see further discussion below on “Relational Personhood”).

## **NARROWING THE DIVIDE: RELATIONAL OBJECT-BEINGS AND THE SPACES IN BETWEEN**

Among the many other-than-human persons that exist in the world, objects and their roles as social actors are perhaps of greatest interest to archaeologists. While the archaeological contexts presented in this volume vary substantially, these studies all share the fundamental premise that “intentionality and reflexive consciousness are not exclusive attributes of humanity but potentially available to all beings of the cosmos” (Fausto 2007:497; for further discussion and critique of humanism in archaeology, see Thomas 2002). Although for

many of us it might be difficult to envision objects as animate subjects, a number of anthropologists have led the way in firmly defending their “personhood” (Hodder 2012; Miller 2005; Olsen 2003, 2007; Webmoor and Witmore 2008).

Shifting our focus to objects has narrowed the perceived divide between humans (subjects) and nonhumans (objects). Severin Fowles (2010:25) worries that in our efforts to narrow the subject-object divide, we risk overlooking the “more complicated world of relations in which, packed between the multitudes of self-evident things, are crowds of non-things, negative spaces, lost or forsaken objects, voids or gaps—absences, in other words, that also stand before us as entity-like presences with which we must contend.” Similarly, Marisa Lazzari (2003, 2005) notes that archaeologists’ desire to make things visible and our quest to uncover the “real” meaning behind the symbolic or metaphorical thing is linked with the Western tendency to divide subjects and objects. This perspective echoes a broader postmodernist critique of the interpretative (representationalist) approach to personhood that dominated the post-processual movement, where the human body and the individual were given primacy (Skousen and Buchanan 2015:3). Lazzari (2003) and others advocate an alternative ontology that considers both the seen and the unseen in knowledge building and emphasizes “the relational nature and mutual constituency of both the subject and the object” (Lazzari 2003:200).

Studies of personhood by social psychologists and anthropologists lead us to suggest that Fowles’s “non-things,” much like Lazzari’s “unseeable” domains, are not voids or empty spaces but are filled with the relational dialogues and intersubjective experiences that are central to how humans come to consider nonhumans as persons (Brill de Ramírez 2007; Gillespie and Cornish 2010; Hendon 2010; Miller 1987; Robb 2010). To explore the dialogic and intersubjective nature of this space, some insist we must adopt “an interpretive approach that can address communications and relationships that are not constrained by the articulation of human language and reason” (Brill de Ramírez 2007:24). Case studies presented in this volume advocate such an approach, whereby intersubjectivity does not reside solely in the mind and dialogic activity is not restricted to language. Craft making, bundling, censuring, hunting, divination, dreaming, trance states—these are among the many forms of dialogic, intersubjective experience that simultaneously engages bodily experience and an embodied mind. Such activities produce a range of identities and “conversive” relationships (*sensu* Brill de Ramírez 2007), which seek connections between (human and nonhuman) persons and the cosmos, as opposed to a strictly discursive perspective, which tends to divide and categorize aspects of the world (see also Budden and Sofaer 2009).

Such conversive relations are similar to non-discursive experiences, involving repeated, intimate engagements with tools, materials, objects, and places that create opportunities for more materially mediated interactions (see Budden and Sofaer 2009). Yet conversive relations go beyond simply a non-discursive, bodily performed experience; they are generative actions that bind intangible relational beings, create personhood, and produce an animate ontological status in an object-body. It is the co-creative (re)productive process that is crucial for generating the movement and life force in a relational being (see Harrison-Buck, this volume). Intersubjectivity captures important aspects of the relationships, identities, and interdependencies that are continually formed through this conversive relationship (Harrison-Buck 2015; Hendon 2010). Through the interplay of subject and object, body and mind, both conversive “dialogue” and intersubjectivity create a web of shared significance and meanings (Jackson 1998) that are “constituted and reconstituted through historical action” (Hendon 2010:28). Elsewhere, Julia Hendon (2010:27–28) describes this “web of human sociality” as “communities of practice in which learning takes place and knowledge is constructed.” Lynn Meskell (2005:2–3) refers to this interplay of cultural construction, praxis, and object biographies as “material habitus.”

Ian Hodder (2012) suggests that human-object relationships gradually develop into intentional configurations that are actively negotiated and, as such, are inherently unstable. This idea of instability and ongoing change is a central component of Ingold’s (2007) idea of meshwork where relationships, whether human or nonhuman, are in a constant state of flux and ongoing movement. More recent studies of movement (for objects, specifically) describe this circulation as an itinerary—the string of places and the nodes where these object-bodies come to rest before moving on (Joyce and Gillespie 2015b). This itinerant meshwork involves objects as well as persons, places, animals, and other nonhuman agents, which together form groupings that are variously referred to as nodes (Joyce and Gillespie 2015a), knots (Ingold 2007), bundles (Pauketat 2013; Zedeño 2008), or assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Harris 2013; Jones 2011; Jones and Alberti 2013). These entangled meshworks and bundled assemblages form a relational field that is “constantly moving, gaining and losing parts, and becoming articulated with other assemblages” (Skousen and Buchanan 2015:5). There are many physical expressions of this ontological meshwork in which bundles of knowledge are learned and passed on. Storytelling is one example, and another involves the bundling and transfer of sacred objects—a widely shared practice found throughout the Americas (Pauketat 2013; Zedeño 2008). These and other examples are presented in this

volume and shed light on how the numinous comes to reside in an object-body, its movement through the world, and the nature of its agency as a relational person.

## RELATIONAL PERSONHOOD

Personhood—“a state of being a person” (Fowler 2004:7)—is often described as *relational* (Brück 2004, 2005; Fowler 2004, 2008, 2010, 2016; Hutson 2010). In this definition of personhood, identity is partible, permeable, or both, what Marilyn Strathern (1988) coined the “dividual” who, as opposed to the individual, is not tied to a single human body. Rather, the dividual is composed of fractal or divisible parts that are contextual and shifting in nature (Fowler 2004:7; see also Fowler 2002, 2016; Thomas 2002). Chris Fowler (2004:20–21) keenly observed that “dividuals” are not without self-awareness or individuality; these aspects simply represent less important elements of the relational self. In a more recent publication, Fowler (2016) reiterated this message, cautioning scholars to resist polarizing relational versus bounded types of persons, as this creates a “closed” and universalized ontology and paints groups as internally consistent and without contradiction, often falsely dichotomizing Western and non-Western cultures (see also recent discussions by Fowles 2013; Harris and Robb 2012; Harrison-Buck, this volume; Wilkinson 2013).

Cognitive scientists argue that we are all relationally constituted at birth (Pina-Cabral 2016). Human beings are inherently social and their personhood is shaped by intersubjective bodily experience, making the opposition between Western individual and non-Western dividual a moot point (see Harrison-Buck, this volume). Yet despite what cognitive science and cultural anthropology say about relational personhood, Marshall Sahlins (2011:14) argues that most scholars base their studies on the singular individual rather than placing the emphasis on the intersubjective (inherently social) being as a site of analysis. In this volume contributors recognize that intersubjectivity is a fundamental and indispensable condition of all personhood and that it is from here that we discover our individual selves and learn appropriate ways of being in the world in which we live and move about. In any society, personhood is not a static or fixed category but an ongoing engagement—conversive—and mutually constituted.

The diverse set of case studies presented in this volume covers a range of cultural, geographical, and historical contexts. Yet they all address how mutually constitutive conversive relations involve generative acts that together produce things in the world, which include both human and nonhuman entities (for

further discussion of these shared aspects, see Harrison-Buck, this volume). As inherently co-creative and conversively responsive, the status of relational persons is contingent on both ongoing movement (agency) and reciprocal engagements (mutual constitution) with other relational entities (Hill 2011:409; Ingold 2006:12). For the Pueblo in the American Southwest, Severin Fowles (2013:157) describes this relationship as a complex *interdependency* rather than a simple “cause-and-effect” relationship—“a nonmodern cosmology . . . in which human doings and the cosmos are consistently read in light of one another.” In this and other instances, humans, plants, spirits, animals, and objects are all potentially persons and are among the many receptacle-bodies where the numinous comes to reside, sometimes remaining dormant until an interaction occurs with another relational being, bringing it to life.

### **PRACTICING PERSONHOOD: RESPONSIVE RELATEDNESS AND EMBODIED EXPERIENCE**

Relational personhood is a condition of being alive in a world that, as Graham Harvey (2006:12) notes, is “a community of persons not all of whom are human.” This results in a distinct way of knowing the world that emphasizes one’s reciprocal relationship with it. Nurit Bird-David (1999:S68–S69) has described this as a two-way conversation of “responsive relatedness”—perceived as “mutually responsive changes in things in-the-world and at the same time in themselves” (see also Alberti and Bray 2009; Harvey 2006; Ingold 2006). For instance, in some societies hunters regard animals as other-than-human persons and view their success in the hunt as an animal’s willingness to sacrifice itself, contingent on their close relationship with the animal being hunted (Hill 2011 and this volume; see also Brown and Emery 2008; Fausto 2007; Ingold 1996, 2000; McNiven 2010, 2013; Pedersen 2001). In these instances, hunters often follow specific protocols for killing and eating animals that are associated with rituals of self-sacrifice.

A two-way relationship between humans and animal persons that requires special attention resembles Bird-David’s (1999) “responsive relatedness,” discussed above. This kind of empathetic concern for another sentient being (human, animal, or otherwise) is directly related to an intersubjective relational ontology as an embodied experience and is akin to Fowles’s (2013:158) notion of *sympathy*, where “ecology and morality meet.” Centered on bodily feelings, a relational ontology involves a conscious awareness of one’s positioning and activity in the world as a reciprocal and relational being. It is heavily reliant on human physiology and bodily sensation (Furst 1997; Harrison-Buck

2015; Houston and Taube 2000; Houston et al. 2006; Ingold 2006, 2010; López Austin 1988; Pauketat 2013). People enmeshed in a relational ontology “turned, not to theological pronouncements and speculations to verify their ideas, but to experience—to what can be seen, touched, heard, and smelled” (Furst 1997:2–3). Many studies have characterized these distinct ways of knowing the world as physical aspects of spirituality and ritual practice traditionally associated with animistic and totemic societies (Bird-David 1999; Houston and Taube 2000; Houston et al. 2006; Insoll 2011; López Austin 1988; McNiven 2010; Molesky-Poz 2006; Pauketat 2013; Pedersen 2001; Stross 1998; Tedlock 1982). Rather than a set of religious beliefs, Jean Molesky-Poz (2006:154–68) describes this as a “theology of experience” and as “ways of living [one’s] beliefs” (Molesky-Poz 2006:45)—a shared embodied experience that engages both the body and the mind.

Lynn Meskell (2005) notes that the lived experience both shapes the material world and is shaped by materiality (see also Malafouris 2013). Yet she also emphasizes the role of immateriality and its specific relationship with “embodied practices in the spheres of magic and making” (Meskell 2005:3). As an embodied practice, material agency is more than just about enchanting objects and animating the inanimate. Alfred Gell (1999:179) suggests that the enchantment of objects is a technical process whereby “magic” serves as a dialectical method for dealing with uncertainty and is inherently linked to the notion of knowledge and rational technical solutions. Although Gell’s approach has been critiqued for offering a “coolly detached formalism [to] enchantment” (Fowles 2013:156), one could argue that this kind of dialectical reasoning is present when groups look to sacred materials, such as bundles, for help in solving a problem. Among the Blackfoot tribes in native North America, Maria Nieves Zedeño (2008:368) notes: “[The most powerful bundles] are generally attributed to actions of the supreme beings who transferred a bundle to a human . . . [and when] called upon by the bundle holder for help on a particular matter, [the object-persons] act in concert to concede what is being asked of them. In this process, object-persons transfer their power to one another and to the bundle holder, who can in turn complete the ritual.”

Instructions for how bundles are to be assembled, used, or transferred to other humans often are delivered through visions or dreams. The dialectical methods used to obtain answerability in the world can vary considerably. In some cases, ritual practitioners seek knowledge by “listening to the movements in their bodies,” often in the blood and breath, or by casting seeds, by reading fire, or through music and dance (Molesky-Poz 2006:158–59; Tedlock 1982:50). These are not one-way pronouncements of systematized doctrine but

two-way meta-sensory communication that is constituted through ongoing movement with mindful and bodily attentiveness. Being a part of this communication signals personhood—a constitution of being in a relational field that fuels movement in a “world of perpetual flux” (Ingold 2006:12).

While the material and cosmic levels may appear as a stark dichotomy, it is precisely between these two planes that relational beings stand (e.g., Molesky-Poz 2006:156). Timothy Pauketat (2013:32–33) describes this liminal space between structure and agency (mind and body) as the “phenomenal relationships between things, substances, and other intangible qualities . . . that engage the senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—in ways that lend them agentic or transformative power.” In many studies of material agency, the sensuous qualities of the fetishized object or substance are highlighted. While these qualities should certainly not be ignored, equally important as the object (or body) itself is its embodied (mind-body) participation in an “unfolding dialogue” with other relational beings (sensu Jordan 2001:101). The intersubjective relationships of this embodied experience impart animacy and are an unfolding dialogue in that they are always in a process of being made, spawning life and energizing potent forces to move about the universe (see Ingold 2007, 2011, 2013). According to Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez (2007:22), “Such intersubjective communications between diverse persons (be they animate or inanimate—human, animal, plant, rock, star, etc.) occurs [*sic*] in relationally based interactions that are neither discursively nor dialogically oppositional, but conversively co-creative.” In other words, the interdependent nature of these “doings” (sensu Fowles 2013) forms ongoing conversive relationships that not only bring one another into existence but then require “a mutual promise to care for one another” throughout life (Molesky-Poz 2006:76, discussing the relationship between Maya Daykeepers and their sacred bundles).

In a system of relational personhood, conversive relationships are a fluid “meshwork” (sensu Ingold 2007). These ever-changing identities are partible, permeable, or both and not necessarily fixed to a particular object- or human-body (Fowler 2004). In this way, there may be many receptacles or thresholds where the numinous comes to reside and interact with other human and non-human persons. The spirit *thing* is irreducible to a specific object or particular place but provides them with a special “interior quality” (Pedersen 2001:415). This is not a tangible *thing* but a (sympathetic) feeling or concern that draws a person to a particular thing and marks the beginning of an unfolding conversive relationship between subject and object—perhaps something approximating what “thing theorist” Bill Brown (2001:4) describes as the object/thing dialectic where “the thing really names less an object than a particular

subject-object relation.” It is this subject-object relationship that distinguishes the special things from the countless other things that go unnoticed.

And what of the things that do not seem to house any animate life or practice any personhood? These are the things that go unnoticed, or what Morten Pedersen (2001:415–16) calls the “asocial entities”—“the small grey stone and a piece of peeled wild onion” that, for some unexplained reason, are devoid of any “mutual animistic relations.” These asocial entities might sit right next to the more remarkable things one is drawn to. Clearly, these are no ordinary *things*. Yet like humans, not all things or, rather, relations are created equal. To be sure, some things are more powerful than other things. The notion of hierarchy applies to the chosen things assembled in cache offerings and also in sacred bundles. For instance, among the Blackfoot tribe, Zedeño (2008:368) observes a clear hierarchy in which “a bundle’s relative power stems from its specific origin or ‘pedigree.’” The same might be said for a valued heirloom piece that is curated and later placed as a central component of a dedicatory cache—a social practice that constitutes a hierarchy of selective memories that bind people and things through time and space (for some examples, see Joyce 2000; Joyce and Gillespie 2015b; Mills and Walker 2008).

### CAN NONHUMANS BECKON AN EVENT?

While studies of nonhuman agency have elevated objects to the status of social actors, they are often still treated as “pre-discursive matter dressed over with meaning” (Nanoglou 2009:187; see also Butler 1993). As Bjørnar Olsen (2007:580) observes, “Things may be social, even actors, but [they] are rarely assigned more challenging roles than to provide society with a substantial medium where it can inscribe, embody and mirror itself.” For instance, Gell’s (1998) semiotic theory of personhood has been criticized for placing objects in a subordinate role to humans. As Holbraad notes, Gell “[treats] objects *as if* they were persons” and masks the “irreducible sense [that] objects just *are* people” (Holbraad 2009:434, emphasis in original; see also Alberti and Marshall 2009). Julia Hendon (2010) has noted that Gell’s distinctions represent an unwillingness on his part to take his ideas to their logical conclusion. Similarly, Ingold (2000:97) concludes that the positioning of objects in the relational field is what imbues them with power, but humans are often at the foci of that power.

So, how autonomous are objects? Can they operate as relational beings independent of humans? Or is this simply a human projection of imagination onto “things”? It is difficult for most Western thinkers to accept that consciousness

is not universally exclusive to human beings and that the notion of personhood—the reciprocal qualities of relational beings—can be bestowed on animals, plants, spirits, and objects. Yet as we will see in the chapters presented in this volume, seals *required* that their bodily remains be treated in specific ways by human hunters (Hill, this volume) and objects like jade plaques held the capacity to *speak* and do “lively” things (Looper, this volume), while implements like grinding tools could potentially *cause* sickness to those who mistreated them (Hendon, this volume). It seems clear that agency is not necessarily initiated or directed by humans but that nonhumans can also beckon an event. This invariably leads to an interdependent relationship that requires an appropriate form of reciprocal engagement, which in some cases can leave material traces detectable in the archaeological record.

### THE RELATIONAL MATTERS OF BEING AT HAND

The above introduction situates personhood and nonhuman agency in archaeological theory and practice, but we leave it to the contributors of this volume, through their case studies, to more fully cross-examine these ideas regarding agency and materiality in various cultural contexts. Each chapter in this volume examines material culture and particular sets of relationships, practices, actions, materialities, epistemologies, and ontologies of other-than-human agency and personhood that create, embody, and enact complex social worlds. We examine these diverse processes through a series of case studies in different temporal and cultural contexts that cover a wide geographic range, including Australia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. While the cultures and archaeological contexts presented in this volume vary substantially, these studies all consider other-than-human agency and personhood in the archaeological record and the potential impacts of these social actors.

Erica Hill (chapter 2) examines other-than-human social actors among the proto- and early historic Yup'ik and Inupiaq Eskimo of Alaska and the coastal region of the Bering Sea, where a variety of creatures possessed personhood, lived socially, and acted as agents in these enculturated landscapes. Using zooarchaeological evidence and oral narratives, Hill explores the intersection of agency and personhood in Eskimo relations with animals and some of the other-than-human beings that inhabited this complex social world. Importantly, the Eskimo differentiated between agency and personhood, and those differences had implications for human behavior in the course of hunting, traveling, and foraging. Knowledge and practice of these “ritual” behaviors was part of everyday life, and engagement with other-than-human entities

was not limited to shamans—all persons conversively engaged in this unfolding and reciprocal relationship.

Meghan Howey in chapter 3 also focuses on the proto- and early historic Contact period in the Americas, examining European-derived kettles that were interred in the burials of the Mi'kmaq of northeastern North America. This practice emerged in the Maritimes during a liminal stage of social alterity, which occurred in the midst of the early colonial encounters of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Europeans frowned on the “senseless” burial of copper kettles, but to the Mi'kmaq these materials were more than functional utilitarian objects. Howey concludes that copper kettles had unique sensory qualities and were selectively included as grave goods because they held an animating spirit the Mi'kmaq referred to as *mntu*, which existed throughout the universe. Animated with *mntu*, European-origin kettles were referred to as “relatives” who embodied conditions of personhood. Howey explores the complexities of the colonial encounter in the Maritimes using a combination of ethnohistoric and archaeological data and concludes that this European object was turned into a Mi'kmaq relation as a crucial means for navigating the afterworld during a time of devastatingly high death rates as a result of the introduction of European disease. These powerful other-than-human agents empowered the Mi'kmaq when they returned to a world of their own in the afterlife.

In chapter 4, Timothy Pauketat and Susan Alt examine other-than-human agency in the process of Mississippianization in and around the great American city of Cahokia between ca. AD 900–1100. Their analysis takes a genealogical approach to reconstructing the Cahokian way of life in which maize agriculture, pottery production, and mound building were not merely technological developments or material consequences of Mississippianization but rather entangled “rhizomes”—active and enmeshed agents in the Mississippianization of people. These “agentive” raw materials, through their engagement with other organisms, substances, and phenomena such as water and fire, “territorialized” people (*sensu* Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Pauketat and Alt conclude that the Mississippianization process and Cahokia's rapid transformation from a large village into a planned city was not the result of a singular development but constituted a “poiesis”—an entanglement of relational nodes that involved “ongoing co-mediation between human and other-than-human organisms, substances, and phenomena.”

In chapter 5, Maria Nieves Zedeño, Wendi Field Murray, and Kaitlyn Chandler discuss the agency of birds as other-than-human persons and suggest that the exchange of bird feathers was part of an inalienable-commodity-inalienable continuum among native groups in the North American Plains

region. In aboriginal value systems across the Plains, certain feathers from birds such as eagles, woodpeckers, meadowlarks, and waterfowl were highly prized for their magical and cosmological power and were often included as elements in sacred bundles. Likewise, both native and European dyes were prized for their brilliant colors and were considered holy and transformative in their use as paint on feathers and quills, all of which were included in bundles. Similar to the copper kettles discussed by Howey (this volume), European dyes came to be highly valued for their spiritual power and sought after by native groups in trading activities with Europeans at the time of contact. These and other examples presented by Zedeño and colleagues exemplify what they describe as the inalienable-commodity–inalienable continuum, in which certain objects, such as European dyes, could easily transition from one to the other throughout their route of circulation or what some might refer to as the object’s biography or “itinerary” (see Joyce and Gillespie 2015b).

Chapters 6 (Looper) and 7 (Hendon) deal specifically with native notions of object-based agency and personhood in ancient Mesoamerica. In chapter 6, Matthew Looper explores the interrelated visual communication systems of Maya hieroglyphic writing and pictorial art as a means of accessing these perspectives. He presents a detailed analysis of the iconography as well as the text/image relationships of an incised shell plaque from the western Maya region to illustrate the very complex manner in which the textual and pictorial record communicates agency. His analysis suggests that for the ancient Maya, the mechanism through which the agency of these objects is activated is intimately connected to the acts of writing and reading as well as to the associations of vital breath with speech. Looper observes that the Maya ascribed agency not only to breath and speech but also to the medium of wind and sound, such as the thunderous roar of a human breath or a gust of wind blown through a conch shell trumpet. A broader implication of Looper’s study is the recognition that agency depends upon both discourse and materiality to achieve its social effects and that this can take place independent of the human body (for a related example, see Harrison-Buck 2012:66–67).

Looper’s study indicates that, as in many other cultures, a nonhuman appearance did not disqualify an object, organism, or substance from being an agent in ancient Mesoamerica. Hendon (chapter 7) comes to a similar conclusion in her study of tools as other-than-human agents. Implements, such as spindle whorls used for weaving and groundstone used for grinding activities, tend to be understood strictly in terms of their functionality (textile and food production, respectively). Hendon explores a robust ethnographic data set, as well as visual scenes in Postclassic and Contact period codices, to re-conceptualize

tools not strictly in terms of functional technology but as sets of relationships between tools and people that embody a relational ontology and fundamental core of Mesoamerican personhood. As extensions of the self, tools embody extra-somatic essences or “soul” parts of those who use them and are persons themselves in that they recursively shape the personhood of those who use them. Hendon concludes, therefore, that tools are both agents and persons because they act back or reciprocate through the kinds of actions they are repeatedly engaged in over time, and those actions contribute to social memory (see also Hendon 2010, 2012).

In chapter 8, Ian McNiven examines the agency and personhood of marine transport canoes among the Torres Strait Islanders. The status of canoes as object-beings began with the felling of the trees that produced these vessels and was elaborated through the use of decorative elements, such as paint, shells, streamers, and feather adornments, and through “magical” acts, such as the beating of a canoe with bunches of grasses. According to McNiven, the material and conceptual elaboration of canoes constituted an animic process of socialization that expresses four interdependent constituents—anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, intentionization, and predatorization. He concludes that by transforming the tree (associated with land, anchoring, and heaviness) into a canoe hull (associated with the sea, mobility, and lightness), the canoe was deemed a domesticated or socialized (versus wild) entity. These acts embody the canoe with elements, namely, lightness and speed, deemed successful among persons (human or otherwise).

Ann Stahl, in chapter 9, explores personhood and the agency of objects in the Banda area of west-central Ghana. She examines African villages that date between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, focusing on the remains of bangles, rings, beads, and other objects typically classified as “ornaments.” Stahl argues that this label masks the agency of these efficacious objects and interprets design elements not just in terms of their visual or “symbolic” meaning but also as cues that prompted efficacious action. During the course of their circulation or “object itinerary” (sensu Joyce and Gillespie 2015a), such ornaments configured well-being as forms of protection and healing through their actions on bodies and as bundled offerings at shrines. Stahl concludes that ornamenting a human or nonhuman body (such as a shrine context) was not merely a representational act “but an ontologically significant practice” that produced subjects (infants, children, emerging adults, and so on) and formed personhood through techniques of the subject as “marked” and “bundled” assemblages (sensu Keane 2008). Stahl’s detailed analysis is couched in the broader changing historical context of West Africa that impacted

African ornamentation as “technologies of personhood” as a result of centuries of Saharan and later Atlantic trade involving intercontinental entanglements with Europeans.

In chapter 10, Joanna Brück and Andrew Jones examine the occurrence of fossils in British Early Bronze Age burials and critique traditional assumptions of personhood that rely on grave goods as status indicators of the interred. As neither prestige goods nor indices of status, fossils prompt a reconsideration of such Western-based models that, as Brück and Jones note, “presuppose that the human self is set apart from (and is superior to) the natural world, including inanimate objects.” Instead, they suggest that Bronze Age people may have seen fossils as crafted objects from long ago rather than as simply “natural” specimens. They cite the presence of crafted fossil skeuomorphs (artifacts made to resemble fossils) that lends support to this idea. The material response among Bronze Age inhabitants suggests a shared intersubjectivity whereby fossils and crafted fossil skeuomorphs served as recursive indices of once-living beings, perhaps in reference to cosmogonic origins. As relational and cosmologically charged beings linked to earlier ancestral periods, these “natural” and crafted objects were fitting accompaniments for deceased ancestors. Brück and Jones conclude that the fossils and other various elements of the grave assemblage constitute an expression of relational personhood that conflates the nature-culture divide and “[situates] the person in narratives of belonging and genealogy.”

In the final chapter of the volume (chapter 11), Eleanor Harrison-Buck examines contemporary theories of agency and personhood and the use of relational perspectives in archaeology. In recent years, relational personhood has replaced interpretative approaches that are aimed at decoding the “symbolic” meaning of the object-body and their context(s). Grounded in Western epistemology, such representational approaches are heavily focused on context and the interpretative meaning of an object-body, which are problematic because they tend to ignore other perspectives (Alberti et al. 2013; Skousen and Buchanan 2015). Harrison-Buck reviews archaeological and ethnographic case studies, including those presented in this volume, that demonstrate the regional and contextual variability of agency and relational personhood worldwide. One shared theme she explores is agency and personhood as a generative and mutually constituted process, as opposed to fixed or universal categories. She addresses an overarching critique of the so-called new ontological realism (Gabriel 2015; Thomas 2015), which generally rejects the classic “humanist” divides, such as culture-nature, human-animal, and animate-inanimate (Watts 2013b:16). Despite attempts to eradicate Cartesian dualisms, she argues

that the wholesale rejection of cognitivism has to some extent perpetuated a mind/body split in current scholarship on relational ontology in archaeology.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Shifting our perspective of the world to a “meshwork” of intricate relational fields (sensu Ingold 2006) provides archaeologists with an epistemic practice that allows alternative ontologies to emerge in our theorizing but is only successful when taken seriously. Elsewhere, Linda Brown and William Walker note, “In using terms such as ‘ascribed,’ ‘beliefs,’ or ‘symbolic constructs’ to describe the agency of nonhuman persons and things, we dismiss [these alternative] ontologies while running the risk of overlooking the ‘real’ material implications of interactions with these active agents” (Brown and Walker 2008:297–98). Taking nonhuman agency and relational personhood seriously means defining the ontological inconsistencies and variation and how these social (or asocial) beings operationalize in the local landscape. By viewing humans and other-than-humans as co-equal persons in the world, we recognize a greater diversity of conversive participants and are forced to reconsider our interpretive approaches to archaeology that are steeped in colonialist perceptions of discursive forms of hegemonic communication, which have traditionally dominated the field of anthropology (Brill de Ramírez 2007:24–25).

In many of the chapters in this volume, the theoretical framework relies on ethnographic data and addresses the relevance of local knowledge in our archaeological interpretations. In this way, the volume elevates indigenous theory to the level of other theoretical paradigms in the field of anthropology. That said, it remains questionable whether being on par with the scientific community (and writing and publishing about one’s culture) is necessarily an emancipatory ideal for the indigenous community (Kumoll 2010:84). As anthropology can never be entirely extricated from its colonial roots and fully escape its Western modes of inquiry, the hypocrisy and paradox of this field remains a problem that may never be resolved, particularly for indigenous scholars (Alberti and Marshall 2009; Hereniko 2000; Nicholas 2010). In truth, it is debatable whether destabilizing Western intellectual traditions in any way directly benefits indigenous communities (but see Lazzari and Korstanje 2013). However, most scholars, including the contributors to this volume, would probably agree that listening to the indigenous communities and considering their ontological and epistemological frameworks has strengthened their interpretations and benefits anthropology. Without critical revision, we risk perpetuating what Bird-David (1999:568) describes as a “twofold vicious

cycle.” Anthropologists become guilty of trying to save indigenous peoples from derogatory images of *primitivity* and, in turn, attempt to rehabilitate popular views of these “non-Western” cultures by casting them in a new light of economic and political complexity that is more sophisticated, at least by our own standards. Postmodern epistemology has left us with a harsh dichotomy that in some ways has only furthered the vast ontological divide between the “West and the rest”—the very thing post-colonial scholars have been working so hard to dismantle. Skirting this divide and finding a “way out” is the challenge the contributors of this volume take up in an effort to move the ontological project forward in archaeology.

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Following the lead of ethnographers working in the Arctic, Subarctic, and Amazonia, archaeologists have recently directed their attention to identifying and describing relational ontologies in the past. These ontologies are generally animist in orientation, assigning agency—and sometimes personhood—to a host of other-than-human actors, including animals, ostensibly “inanimate” objects, spirits, ancestors, and the dead (Betts et al. 2015; Watts 2013). Agency has been defined broadly as the “causal consequences” objects have on human activity, including the performance characteristics of material things (Brown and Walker 2008:298). Dobres and Robb (2000) argued that agency is critical to the understanding of material culture, social reproduction, and the construction of both group and individual selves. They identified variables relevant to the study of agency in the past, such as intentionality, operative scale, and role in social change. Their work addressed personhood tangentially, suggesting that the social constitution of the subject in terms of gender, age, race, and class was relevant to the exercise of agency (Dobres and Robb 2000:8–9, 11). More recently, Robb (2010:494) has revisited agency, defining it as “the socially reproductive quality of action within social relationships” mediated and contextualized by material things.

Robb (2010) focused on agency as a social phenomenon enacted through intersubjective practice. This perspective is linked to recent archaeological approaches that privilege personhood. Robb’s “agents” overlap with

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