

REVIEWS

Relational Identities and Other-than-Human Agency in Archaeology. ELEANOR HARRISON-BUCK and JULIA A. HENDON, editors. 2018. University Press of Colorado, Louisville. vi + 296 pp. \$73.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-60732-746-2.

Reviewed by Susan D. Gillespie, University of Florida

The premise of this volume is that objects, animals, and other nonhumans can exhibit agency, personhood, and intentionality heretofore seemingly monopolized by humans. Furthermore, the animate potencies and properties of human and other-than-human actors are not a priori or static but emerge out of active relationships linking humans and others in social fields. As explained in the introduction, these axioms are embedded within the “new ontologies” now impacting many disciplines, including archaeology. In this metaphysical paradigm shift, the old Cartesian dualisms that mark modern Western thought are renounced: subject-object, mind-body, culture-nature, form-matter, and so forth. However, these stubborn dichotomies are difficult to eliminate.

The volume’s 11 chapters include an introduction by the coeditors, a concluding summary by Harrison-Buck, and nine case studies intended to exemplify the great diversity of cultural practices regarding non-human agency, personhood, animacy, and object-beings, both in terms of singular objects or materials and as assembled composites. Most chapters deal with North America and Middle America: Alaskan Inuit (Hill), colonial-era Canadian Maritime provinces (Howey), the Mississippian mid-continent (Pauketat and Alt), historic Plains Indians (Zedeño, Murray, and Chandler), and the Classic Maya (one chapter by Looper and one by Hendon). The Old World is represented by chapters on colonial West Africa (Stahl), twentieth-century Melanesia (McNiven), and Bronze Age Britain (Brück and Jones).

The introductory and concluding chapters provide a general background on agency, personhood, and relationism, going over some now well-trodden ground. However, it was not their intent to promote

and apply a uniform set of overarching concepts or a simple dichotomy of Western and non-Western ontologies. On the contrary, the volume’s strength lies in the contributors’ attention to specific historical and cultural contexts for the emergence and expression of object personhood or agency. Definitions of key terms and concepts are therefore varied, derived from diverse theoretical approaches and local knowledges. Readers may then choose those ideas that seem most appropriate to their own research interests. Well-developed bibliographies for each chapter invite further investigation, although I was surprised by the scarce mention of Marcel Mauss.

The title refers to archaeology, and the chapters were written by and for archaeologists. Nevertheless, many archaeologists may be underwhelmed by the archaeological analyses. Little information on the personhood or agency of nonhumans in the past was determined from physical vestiges or by hypothesizing such properties and then warranting their manifestation from material traces alone. Virtually all authors rely to some extent, and even primarily, on ethnographic, historical, iconographic, and epigraphic evidence for the likelihood that certain objects, animals, and other nonhumans or semihumans acted in ways that indicated their attainment of personhood or agency. Some contributors merely gathered such evidence, and only a few authors focus on interpreting specific archaeological materials. Even so, those authors accept the capacity for agency or personhood based on other evidence and then conjecture how it may have played out in the past.

In fairness, the stated objective for the case studies was to alert archaeologists to the strong likelihood that the peoples whose lives they scrutinize inhabited landscapes shared with nonhuman agents and persons, assuming a wide variety of forms and situations. The diversity illustrated in these few short examples makes clear that instances of nonhuman actors, agents, and persons cannot be expected to look the same from one context to another.

Still, pesky dualisms have continued to intrude. They include a renewed mind-body dichotomy

implicit in an ontological turn that separates out and rejects “discursive cognitivism” in favor of “nondiscursive materiality,” as elaborated by Harrison-Buck. But there is also the title itself. The “other-than-human” descriptor, coined by A. Irving Hallowell in an Ojibwa ethnography in 1960, was admittedly equivalent to the more common “non-human.” It indicates a resilient ontological divide in which *human* is the marked term against which all other identities are measured. Significantly, a few authors examine this dichotomy and find it wanting, suggesting instead a continuum of existences and interpolations between idealized poles of human and nonhuman. Indeed, in a fully relational ontology founded in dynamic and transformative assemblages, neither humans nor nonhumans should constitute monolithic phenomena. Just as objects and animals can range from more to less humanlike, so too might humans exhibit a continuum of statuses, including subhumans and suprahumans, which should have some archaeological visibility. But with their exploration of the great diversity of contexts and statuses of object personhood, agency, and animacy, the contributors raise a number of new questions that amplify the volume’s role in ongoing theoretical dialogues.

Religion and Politics in the Ancient Americas. SARAH B. BARBER and ARTHUR A. JOYCE, editors. 2018. Routledge, London. xvi + 307 pp. \$39.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-138-90789-8.

Reviewed by Christine S. VanPool, University of Missouri

This volume explores archaeological approaches to studying religion, drawing upon examples from across the New World and case studies from different periods of the past, ranging from Preceramic Peru to the period of European contact and colonialism in North America. Arthur Joyce’s introduction to the volume states that the essays are designed to meet three goals:

- (1) To move beyond a focus on religion as a means of political integration; (2) to consider Native American religion from the perspective of indigenous ontologies; and (3) to consider the archaeology of religion and politics from the perspectives of theories of materiality [p. 11].

Each of these goals fits current trends in archaeological analyses of religion, and the volume as a whole

expands on the burgeoning body of literature published over the last decade or so.

To meet the first goal of focusing on religion beyond its political and “functional” importance, all of the essays to some degree are focused on how individuals or communities manipulate “religion.” One of the strengths of this volume is its illustrations of diverse approaches to studying religious communities. The second goal of integrating indigenous ontologies is met through the careful application of ethnographic data in several cases. Those interested in Amerindian ontologies will find the chapters by Alt and Pauketat (Mississippian religion), Christopher Rodning (Cherokee religion), and Maria Nieves Zedeño (summary chapter) particularly interesting. Other chapters, including those by Sarah Barber (Early Formative period in Chiapas, Mexico), David Carballo (Aztec religion), Edward Swenson (Late Moche and Early Lambayeque cultures of Peru), Matthew Piscitelli (Late Archaic in Peru), and Scott Hutson and colleagues (Maya religion and ritual), rely more on archaeological data to explore underlying ontological frameworks. Likewise, the third goal of applying materiality studies is met successfully. For example, Erina Gruner’s chapter on Chaco Canyon complements previous work on materiality done by Ruth Van Dyke.

There is much to praise in many of the chapters. For example, many of the authors consider the nature and importance of bundles and in doing so provide excellent insight into their importance and variation. Alt and Pauketat note that bundles can be people, places, and things; Barber characterizes ball courts as bundles; and Zedeño in the concluding chapter provides a detailed discussion of the concept as it is presented in the volume that is worth reading. The discussions of the materiality of bundles may in fact be the most interesting contribution of this volume, to some readers. Likewise, those seeking theoretical and methodological approaches to studying religion will find useful insights from Walker’s innovative essay, which reconstructs Amerindian ontology in Amazonia through his study of landscape utilization.

However, there are a few characteristics of the volume that might frustrate some readers. Perhaps most notably, there is little consistency in terminology. Such issues have been present in the anthropology of religion since E. B. Tylor’s first musings on the topic in the nineteenth century, but terminological issues are problematic here. While not clearly stated, many (but not all) authors appear to reject common terms (e.g., *animism*, *spirit*, *supernatural*) and instead use a variety of wordy or awkward phrases to seemingly refer to the same thing. One such set of phrases