
SPECIAL SECTION

Archaeology and Assemblage

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Assemblage is a concept common to a number of academic disciplines, most notably archaeology and art, but also geology and palaeontology. Archaeology can claim a special link to the term assemblage, though novel approaches to the concept of assemblage have recently been adopted from the fields of philosophy and political theory. These approaches, bracketed under the term ‘new materialism’, are discussed here. The introduction to this collection of papers outlines these approaches and evaluates their usefulness for archaeological practice and interpretation.

Introduction

Assemblage is a concept common to a number of academic disciplines, most notably archaeology and art, but also geology and palaeontology. Archaeology can claim a special link to the term assemblage: it has been using the term for quite some time, and more intensively at least since the 1960s (Fig. 1), coinciding perhaps with its more ‘scientific/positivist’ turn; although, if we are to believe Google Books graphs, the phrase ‘archaeological assemblages’ seems to decline in use at the turn of the millennium (Fig. 2). The term assemblage has, of course, a much longer history than archaeology, but it is interesting that it again became popular since 1950, perhaps coinciding with its increasingly common use within archaeology (Figs. 1, 2). Its omnipresent use in archaeology seems to have taken on two distinct but related meanings: the aggregation of objects made of the same material (e.g. an assemblage of pottery or lithics) or held together by shared typological or stylistic similarities; and an aggregation of diverse objects united by a distinctive and clearly defined context of variable scale, e.g. the archaeological assemblage of a cave or the archaeological assemblage of a chronological phase (cf. Lucas 2012).

These are the conventional definitions of ‘assemblage’ in archaeology. Recent scholarship in a number of fields has begun to discuss the notion of ‘as-

semblage’ in new and dynamic ways. This includes scholarship in human geography (Anderson & Harrison 2010; Anderson & Macfarlane 2011), material culture (Coole & Frost 2010) and political theory (Bennett 2010). This work is mirrored by recent work in archaeology (e.g. Bonney *et al.* 2016; Chapman 2000; Cobb & Croucher 2014; Fowler 2013; Hamilakis 2013; Harris 2014; Harrison 2011; Jones 2012; Jones & Alberti 2013; Lucas 2012; Normark 2009; Pauketat 2013a). The purpose of this introduction to a thematic issue on assemblages in archaeology is briefly to review these new ideas.

Art practice and assemblage

Artists have explored the idea of assemblage in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most striking would be artists working in the early years of the twentieth century in the movements known as Dada and Surrealism. Consider Dadaists such as Marcel Janco, Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch, whose sculptures and collages used bits and pieces of everyday things—newsprint, photographs, typewriters, metal cups, string—and recomposed them to produce new artworks. Likewise, Tristan Tzara and Hans Arp produced Dada poetry from deliberately random sections of cut out newspaper. Dadaists used collage and assemblage as a method of challenging, and producing



Figure 1. (Colour online) The occurrence of terms 'archaeology' and 'assemblage' in the literature since 1700. (Google Books Ngram Viewer.)

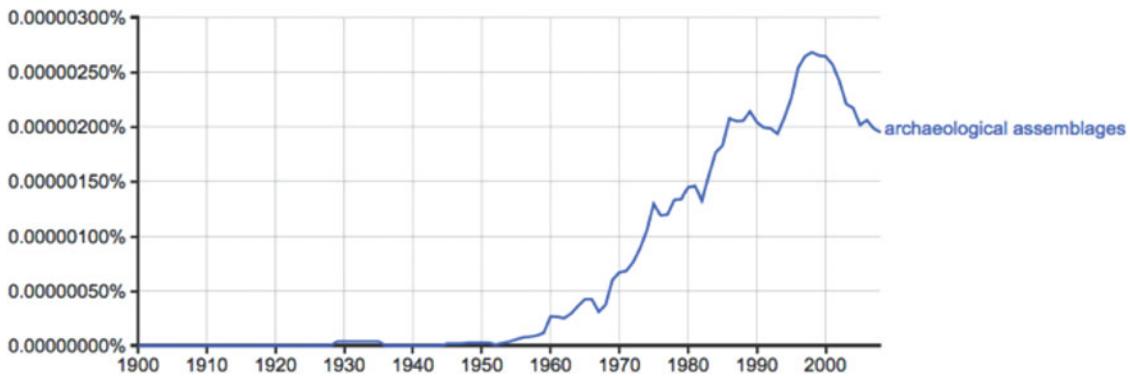


Figure 2. (Colour online) The occurrence of term 'archaeological assemblages' in the literature since 1900. (Google Books Ngram Viewer.)

something shockingly new from the scraps of the everyday (Richter 1965). Perhaps the best-known example of this is Marcel Duchamp's adoption of ready-made objects in his art, most famously in pieces like *Fountain* (1917: a signed porcelain urinal), *Pharmacy* (1914: a cheap reproduction painting of a winter's evening with the addition of two small dots of paint, one red, one yellow), *Bicycle Wheel* (1913: a single bicycle wheel attached to a four-legged wooden stool).

Surrealists were concerned with exposing the irrational in the everyday through collage and assemblage by adopting the notion of the *poème objet*: a play between word and image. For example, Salvador Dalí's *Retrospective Bust* of 1933 was composed of plastic, metal and a bread baguette. The sculpture included an inkwell modelled on figures in a painting by Jean-François Millet fixed to a loaf of bread balanced on a woman's head (modelled in plastic). The loaf did not last long—it had to be remade in plaster after Picasso's dog ate it at the Surrealist exhibition of 1936 at Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris! (Gale 1997, 316). This, and other objects and paintings produced by

Surrealists including Joan Miró, André Masson and Yves Tanguy, were concerned with juxtaposition as a process of revelation: to reveal the irrational, the unconscious, the surreal in the everyday (Gale 1997, 334).

Many of these techniques have had a lasting cultural value. For example, the cut-up methods of Dada poetry were adopted by the Beat novelist William Burroughs in the 1950s and '60s, while collage, found objects and readymades continue to have an impact. Performance art is also a sub-field associated with assemblage and juxtaposition. In her insightful discussion of the phenomena of Happenings in 1960s New York, Susan Sontag (2009, 266) describes how: 'The Happening operates by creating an asymmetrical network of surprises, without climax or consummation...'. Happenings, in Sontag's terms, are an art form of 'radical juxtaposition'. Another example: Robert Rauschenberg's piece *Erased de Kooning Drawing* of 1953 (an erased drawing by Willem de Kooning, juxtaposed with a painting by Rauschenberg: Katz 2006). Consider also the Young British Artist generation—think Damien Hirst's shark (*The Physical*

Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living) and Tracy Emin's bed (*My Bed*)—and the art of a number of contemporary art practitioners – think of any number of pieces by the Chapman Brothers, or even Cornelia Parker's *Pavement Cracks*—a literal re-casting of the everyday in a new medium, as the cracks in a London pavement are made in bronze (Blazwick 2013). To underline the talismanic importance of assemblage to art practice it is notable that the 2015 Turner Prize (a British contemporary art prize) was awarded to a group of artists and architects producing public art projects known as *Assemble*.

It is for these reasons that Deleuze and Guattari (2009) emphasize the critical role of artists as exemplars of assemblage making. Assemblage is vital to art practice and offers two important lessons regarding assemblages: firstly, the making of assemblages is a dynamic but also deliberate rather than random process. Second, the juxtaposition of distinct elements can be transformative, generating new entities, new possibilities and new ways of understanding.

The agency of assemblages

These art practices resonate with scholarship in other disciplines where the significance of assemblage has been reasserted. Perhaps the clearest articulation of the new scholarship on assemblage comes from the work of political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) who discusses the agency of assemblage, drawing on the philosophies of Baruch Spinoza and of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Spinoza's anti-Cartesian, monistic thinking set the foundations for a philosophy of affectivity, the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected, connecting at the same time agency with a generalized rather than an individuated emotion, with passion. This is what he says, in his *Ethics*:

By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time the ideas of these affections. Therefore, if we can be the adequate cause of any of these affections, I understand by the affect an action; otherwise, a passion. (Spinoza 1996, 70)

Spinoza has had a major impact on the first theoreticians to advance assemblage thinking in modern times, Deleuze and Guattari. Engagement with Spinoza's work helped them emphasize not only the heterogeneity of the assemblage, but also its relationality, as well as the primacy of affectivity, the ability to affect and be affected, as opposed to the typological or other external similarities of its components (cf.

Deleuze 1998, 124–5; also Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 253–60). As Bennett (2010, 34) puts it: 'an assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it'. Given the relational properties of the assemblage, the configuration of the assemblage will depend on the particular capacities and agencies of the bodies out of which it is composed. Morphologically, typologically or taxonomically similar components will have a different agentic impact in different assemblage configurations.

Two other thinkers are key to this debate: Bruno Latour and Manuel DeLanda. Both are concerned with the social implications of assemblages and networks. In *A New Philosophy of Society*, DeLanda (2006a) explores assemblages as a new way of describing social ontologies. DeLanda argues that thinking of societies as assemblages offers a useful alternative to organic or totalizing accounts. He summarizes the main features of his assemblage theory: assemblages are made up of parts that are self-subsistent and articulated by external relations, so that a part may be detached and made a component of another assemblage (DeLanda 2006a, 18). He goes on to point out that assemblages are characterized along two dimensions. The first dimension specifies the variable roles that component parts may play, from a purely material to a purely expressive role, as well as mixtures of the two. The second dimension characterizes the processes in which these components are involved: these might be processes that stabilize or destabilize the identity of the assemblage (DeLanda 2006a, 19). DeLanda uses these concepts to describe the aggregate of processes involved in the formation of towns, cities and nations: assemblages may operate at a number of scales (DeLanda 1997; 2006a). In a similar sense, in *Reassembling the Social*, Latour (2005) offers a challenge to our definition of the social. For Latour, societies are composed of both people and objects, both of which act together, and with equal capacity. Agency—the ability to act—is distributed throughout networks. Societies are therefore assemblages (in the Latourian rather than Deleuzian sense), or networks, composed of heterogeneous groups of actors distributed through social networks. These concepts lie at the heart of 'Actor Network-Theory', and have been well discussed by archaeologists on a number of occasions (Olsen 2003; 2010; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Shanks 2007; Witmore 2007). But these renderings of and departures from the concept of assemblage as initially proposed and formulated by Deleuze and Guattari are not without their problems, some of which are discussed below and in some of the papers to follow (see especially Hamilakis).

Deleuzian assemblages or Latourian and DeLandian networks?

As we noted above, in the conventional understanding of assemblages in archaeology, the main emphasis is either on formal and material similarity, or on spatial and chronological co-presence or proximity, in other words on aggregation. The recent discussion on assemblages is, however, more diverse and more sophisticated theoretically, and thus much more interesting. It can be seen as part of the ontological debate in archaeology (as well as in other disciplines, such as social anthropology), but also of the emphasis on relationality, and the impact (on archaeology, amongst other fields) of what has been called ‘new materialisms’ (e.g. Witmore 2014). Further, the popularity of the concept of the assemblage can be seen as an another expression of the increasing impact of Deleuzian thought on many and diverse fields, with archaeology being no exception. Foucault had seen this coming, when, in a review of Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition and the Logic of Sense*, in 1970 he declared that ‘perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian’ (Foucault 1970, 885). It seems that his prophecy will come true for the next century as well.

But how Deleuzian is our Deleuzian turn? For a start, the English term ‘assemblage’ is a translation of the French *agencement*. Deleuze and Guattari (henceforth D&G) could have used *assemblage* (in French) but chose not to. An appropriate English term for it would have been ‘arrangement’ (cf. Philips 2006). Further, as Ian Buchanan notes (2015, 383), D&G had in mind and perhaps modified the German term *Komplex*, a word with clear (and deliberate on D&G’s part) psychoanalytical connotations, as will become obvious below. Other translations have been offered for this concept, but the term ‘assemblage’ has become the most successful and widespread, despite the fact that several authors have admitted that this is a problematic rendering (Philips 2006). As far as archaeology is concerned, it can be argued that our growing fascination with the concept has to do, to a large extent, with our familiarity with archaeological assemblages, with the primacy that this word holds on our collective disciplinary imagination. If Brian Massumi, the translator of *A Thousand Plateaus*, had selected ‘arrangement’, instead of retaining an earlier, 1981 translation of the term as ‘assemblage’, it is doubtful that we would be having this extensive and productive discussion right now.

But what has been lost in this translation? For a start, the original term in French foregrounds, amongst other things, the deliberate act of bringing things, beings and entities in association, of coming

together, stressing thus the agency involved in this process, something which is less immediately obvious with its translation as assemblage. Moreover, it seems that many archaeological researchers who have recently explored its meaning, beyond our conventional and long-held uses of it to describe an aggregation of finds, have mainly followed DeLanda’s definition and recasting of the idea (e.g. 2006a), a rendering of the concept which is now known as ‘assemblage theory’. The work of Jane Bennett (and other writers within the current of ‘new materialism’) has been another philosophical reference (Bennett 2010). And this is another reason that may explain the current archaeological popularity of the term: especially in DeLanda’s work, the emphasis is on aggregation, on networks and on scale (cf. DeLanda 2006b), and on the relationship between parts and wholes (cf. Buchanan 2015). These have been, of course, important matters for archaeological theory for some time now (Chapman 2000; see also below), linked as they are to debates on typology, on hoarding, on accumulation and dispersal, on sets and nets, on deliberate fragmentation and enchainment through fragments, and so on. Furthermore, the discussion on assemblages arrived in archaeology at a moment when two other sets of ideas enjoyed significant popularity in archaeological thinking. The first is Actor Network Theory, and the work of Bruno Latour in general. The second is non-human agency, and the vitality and vibrancy of matter, embodied by the popularity of Alfred Gell’s ideas for the former (1998) and Jane Bennett’s (2010) for the latter. The fact that assemblage is also a key concept in Bennett’s work facilitated further such fusion. Finally, it is admittedly much easier for Anglo-Saxon literature to connect with works such as DeLanda’s and Bennett’s (even Latour’s), than it is with the works of Deleuze and Guattari, produced in (and often responding to) a different intellectual, social and political milieu.

One may claim that there is nothing wrong with modifying and developing concepts, and D&G would have been the last to complain about that, as they did themselves encourage the selective reading of their own work and the work of others (Deleuze & Guattari 2009). Deleuze, for example, produced a series of extremely insightful but highly idiosyncratic treatises of earlier philosophers, from Spinoza and Nietzsche to Bergson and Foucault. Still, there are several issues to consider here. The first is to be clear about what are we dealing with, and which parts of our thinking are Deleuzian, which DeLandian, and which Latourian or Bennettian. The second is that it would be a shame to abandon so early and so soon the engagement with Deleuzian and Guattarian thinking, before we have even started, especially since it is increasingly

accepted that it has much to offer to archaeology. And the third, and the most important, is that there is a risk that we may be using seemingly novel—for archaeology—concepts to continue doing things in a similar way to before: talk about networks, scales, typologies, or aggregations, for example, limiting thus the interpretative potential and efficacy of the concept of the assemblage (or arrangement). And if that is the case, then why not continue using concepts such as networks (assuming that one is convinced by them), or sets?

With regard to DeLanda's work in particular, it may be worth noting that much of his understanding of assemblages seems to have been shaped by sociologists of organizations and of modernity, such as Max Weber, and Erwin Goffman (cf. DeLanda 2006b, 254, 258). This approach may be useful for certain scales and kinds of analysis, but its mechanistic character is hard to avoid; furthermore, it is not a framework that can be deployed in a universalist manner, especially for pre-modern contexts, and for the kinds of intimate and embodied, affective and experiential understandings of life and matter which archaeologists have been striving to produce, with the help of anthropological thinking, over the past 20 years. Besides, DeLanda's assemblage theory undervalues the key role of affect and of sensoriality (cf. Hamilakis, this issue), harbouring thus the danger of constructing mechanistic, systemic networks and wholes. Finally, DeLanda's project of producing and propagating *a theory* of and around assemblages entails all the dangers of solidifying and formalizing a concept which was always meant to be open and fuzzy. With these critical comments in mind, we now turn to recent archaeological discussions of the notion of assemblage.

Archaeology and assemblage

Two authors have clearly articulated the significance of assemblages for understanding archaeological practice: Gavin Lucas and Chris Fowler. In *The Emergent Past*, Fowler (2013) argues for understanding archaeological practice (in his case the re-interpretation of a series of Early Bronze Age graves from northeast England) as an assemblage configured of materials, things, places, humans, plants, animals, techniques, technologies and ideas. The archaeologist is a component of this assemblage, and archaeological research helps to reconfigure or reshape the assemblage in new ways. For example, Fowler discusses a jet necklace excavated from a burial cist at Kyloe, Northumberland, as a form of extended assemblage. The excavation took place on 9 June 1927, but the necklace has undergone a number of translations

since its discovery: it has been photographed, drawn and reconstructed for display purposes. Each translation has 'changed the extent and effects of the key properties of the necklace by drawing it into new assemblages' (Fowler 2013, 55). The action of successive generations of archaeologists changed the composition and extent of the assemblage.

Fowler draws on the work of Gavin Lucas. In *Understanding the Archaeological Record*, Lucas (2012) argues that, in order to overcome problematic distinctions between the social and the material, archaeological practice should switch its focus to 'entities and their relations'; this allows us to see that 'materiality is a fundamentally a relational process, not a substance, and what really matters is the relations between entities' (Lucas 2012, 167–8). Lucas develops this insight to consider assemblage in two contrasting ways familiar to archaeologists: depositional assemblages and typological assemblages. He examines a series of archaeological practices from excavation, to post-excavation, to the production of archive and publication. In each case, he describes how entities undergo a constant flux, assembling and disassembling, materializing and dematerializing. What becomes clear from Lucas' analysis—like that of Fowler—is that archaeologists shape and compose the assemblages that they excavate. Jones (2015), drawing on the philosopher of science Karen Barad (2007), describes this as a process of intra-action. The work of Lucas and Fowler is particularly important, as their notion of assemblage discusses both archaeological practice and archaeological interpretation. We will turn now to assemblage and archaeological interpretation.

John Chapman (2000) was one of the first to realize the significance of assemblage in his *Fragmentation in Archaeology* (Chapman 2000; see also Chapman & Gaydarska 2007). While the main focus of the book was fragmentation, he was concerned with a series of ways of relating and using materials, and also discussed accumulation as a method by which enchain relations might be expressed. His theoretical framework is based upon the principle of enchainment: material relations—typically taking the form of processes of fragmentation or accumulation—link people. Just as objects can be broken between people to establish a material relationship, so objects can be accumulated, or assembled, and these relations will be expressed anew. The relational character of assemblages (or accumulations) is highlighted here. In *Prehistoric Materialities*, Jones (2012) extends these ideas to consider the spectacular Bronze Age barrows of Irthingborough and Gayhurst, composed of numerous deposits of cattle bones and skulls, as practices of assemblage and accumulation. He also examines the composition of

Bronze Age metalworking and hoarding as works-in-process, at turns fissioning from their point of manufacture and accumulating in hoards at other points in their lives, describing certain metalworking groups as extended assemblages linked by a common origin.

Tim Pauketat (2013a,b) also recognizes the relational character of assemblages in his analysis of the North American practice of bundling. In *An Archaeology of the Cosmos* (Pauketat 2013a) he describes Medicine Bundles as 'good examples of the fundamental process of bundling, including the way they translate, transfer and reposition relational fields' (Pauketat 2013a, 43). Bundles—like assemblages—are ways of articulating and re-articulating relationships. In the case of Medicine Bundles, these relationships took the place of material objects juxtaposed together in wrapped bundles. In his analysis of a series of archaeological contexts across North America, including the Aztec, Plains-Prairie, Puebloan and Mississippian cultures (Ohio Hopewell), he develops this argument to consider bundles as, of, and in time (Pauketat 2013b). Bundles encapsulate past relations (bundles of time), while also promoting future relations (bundles in time). In this sense bundles operate at multiple temporal registers, and offer a useful way of conceptualizing histories.

Yannis Hamilakis (2013) has proposed that a fruitful way to conceptualize and deploy assemblage thinking will be to consider assemblages within a framework of sensoriality and affectivity, hence his term of sensorial assemblages. This is an understanding that goes beyond the modernist paradigm of the five senses, proposing instead that the senses are infinite and resist enumeration and categorization. This ontology suggests that the primary role of the senses is not to allow the organic body to operate but to engender affectivity, meant in the Spinozian sense, as agency as well as collective and trans-corporeal feeling and emotion. In other words, the senses enable us to be 'touched'.

Sensorial assemblages thus are defined as 'the contingent co-presence of heterogeneous elements such as bodies, things, substances, affects, memories, information, and ideas. Sensorial flows and exchanges are part of this sensorial assemblage and at the same time the "glue" that holds it together' (Hamilakis 2013, 126). The field of sensoriality becomes an important element of assemblage thinking, a field that is expanded to include not only bodies, things and landscapes, but also thoughts and memories, all energized by affectivity. Elsewhere in this work, it is also emphasized that assemblages are about temporality; this is a non-linear and non-chronometric understanding of time which foregrounds multi-temporality and co-

existence, rather than mono-chrony or linear succession (cf. Hamilakis 2011; Hamilakis & Labanyi 2008). The commingling of different times in an assemblage, held together by sensorial and affective relations, allows new understandings of temporality and historicity to emerge, and often results in unexpected political effects. The notion of sensorial assemblages has helped reinterpret a range of archaeological contexts in this work, from prehistoric to contemporary. One example is the communal and commingled burials of the tholos tombs of Early Bronze Age Crete, where the sensorial and affective contact of the living with bones and objects from different times would have allowed a distinctive mnemonic-historical understanding to emerge amongst Early Bronze Age Cretan people, resulting at the same time in necro-political effects (for further elaboration and other examples, see Hamilakis, this issue).

Ideas of assemblage have also inspired a range of other, recent trends in archaeology and material culture studies, including the archaeology of the contemporary past. It has been proposed, for example, that a modernist conception of archaeology as recovery or unearthing should be replaced with that of archaeology as 'assembling/reassembling', seen as a dynamic and creative engagement in the present (cf. Harrison 2011), a further development of the critique of the concept of the 'archaeological record' as a given and static entity that remains to be discovered and stewarded by archaeologists (e.g. Hamilakis 1999). Furthermore, recent discussions on archaeological pedagogy have also found assemblage thinking a productive way of reconfiguring teaching and learning (e.g. Cobb & Croucher 2014). This allows us not only to appreciate the heterogeneity and contingency of teaching environments, but also to undermine the dichotomy between teaching and research, thus enabling new hybrid configurations to emerge. In another context, in studying the ontology of the photographic field, Carabott, Hamilakis and Papargyriou (2015, 11) have proposed that the photographic event can be seen as a sensorial assemblage composed of a range of diverse entities: 'the camera, the photographer, the person, thing or landscape to be photographed, the light and the atmosphere, the surrounding props, the onlookers, the photographic memories that are activated prior to taking a photograph', an assemblage which may or may not lead to a photographic afterimage. In so doing, they foreground the materiality of the photographic process and the generative nature of the sensorial assemblage of photography.

We have presented some of the key literature concerned with assemblages in archaeology. In his book *Entangled*, Ian Hodder (2010), one of the

principal architects of contextual archaeology, argues for a new focus on entangled relations between people and things. How does the contextual approach differ from the approach to assemblages presented here? Jones and Alberti (2013, 27–30) discuss the distinction between contexts and assemblages. When discussing context, we are interested in how contexts frame meaning. Discussing this contextual view, Henare *et al.* (2007, 3) point out that the primary aim of much anthropology (and archaeology) appears to be to slot things into their social and historical contexts ‘wherein their significance is produced’. By examining assemblages, on the other hand, we are more concerned with how assemblages actively produce both meanings and affects. By focusing on assemblages, we are less concerned with searching for meaning (a contextual pursuit) and more interested in understanding the affects and effects of assemblages. Moreover, Hamilakis (2013) has noted that in Hodder’s entanglement approach, dependency is the main defining relational characteristic, whereas Hodder’s concept of flow includes primarily flows of matter, energy and information. The relationality of assemblages, however, is richer and more dynamic than the concept of dependency would allow, and elements such as memory and affectivity are of crucial importance in assemblages and assemblage thinking.

The papers collected here engage with many of the themes discussed above. Several authors employ assemblages as a device for re-thinking fundamental archaeological terms, such as ‘style’ or ‘types’ (papers by A. Jones; Fowler). Others employ assemblage to consider archaeological models of change (Crellin; Harris). Some authors are circumspect about new materialisms and seek to employ these new ideas to revitalize older concerns associated with social archaeology, such as identity and cultural value (J. Jones; Robinson), yet others shift the concept of assemblage in new directions, employing the term to consider the sensorial and affective qualities of archaeological materials (Hamilakis). This collection of papers is also accompanied by a group of commentaries from archaeologists and artists critically discussing and assessing the arguments of the various contributors. In that sense, the collection enacts the concept of assemblage.

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