
Material and animal Agency in Inuit Ontology: How Inuit could Speak with Polar Bears

Maryssa Barras

The Canadian arctic is an unforgiving environment for an agricultural based lifestyle. The frigid winter temperatures, agriculturally unproductive soil, and difficult terrain are all unsustainable for sedentary lifestyles without global networks and frequent trade. However, Inuit people have long lived and thrived in this environment abundant with resources such as seal, walrus, caribou, whale, and chert. Colonialism has, of course, impacted the autonomy of Inuit people in irreversible and drastic ways, changing their relationship with the land today from that of their ancestors. Nevertheless, Inuit cultures have developed in the arctic environment where relationships with the land, animals, and people fundamentally contrast with those of modern western academic perspectives. This essay examines how archaeologists approach these relationships arctic research, what types of methodological approaches to ontological analyses have proven useful, and the advantages of ontological analyses in arctic research. Altogether, these three topics will be used to argue that careful, considerate, and cooperative ontological analyses are necessary to consider in all archaeological analyses of past Inuit cultures and people.

In order to discuss ontological analyses in arctic archaeology ontology itself must first be defined. Ontology refers to “a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and how these relate to each other” (Harris and Robb 2012:668). In essence, it refers to how reality can vary based on how an individual person, or culture, has experienced the world. Archaeologists have struggled with understanding the motivations behind non-practical and functional actions of past peoples since the inception of the discipline. Theoretical paradigms in anthropology and sociology have slowly moved towards individualised analyses, which reject purely functional explanations and instead emphasise that culture fosters a variety of unique understandings of the world (Wilcox 2010). Anthropological archaeologists, such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, have increasingly emphasised the need for these types of considerations when studying different peoples.

There has been an increased focus on the nature of the relationship between the “native” being studied, and the anthropologist doing the studying (Viveiros de Castro 2013; Harris and Robb 2012). While the “native” refers to any individual who belongs to a group or descending group of those being studied, in the context of this essay all “natives” are either Indigenous peoples or cultures. In fact, in the Canadian arctic it is absolutely impossible to perform any archaeology without considering Indigenous people or influence. Moving forward into this discussion on ontology, there are two key concepts in Indigenous archaeologies that are important to understand: aboriginalism and plurality of Indigenous archaeologies. The first issue was dramatically brought to light by Robert McGhee in 2008. While his conclusion that Indigenous archaeologies inherently promote aboriginalism has been refuted several times over (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et. al 2010; Wilcox 2010), McGhee’s concern that archaeologists risk essentialising Indigenous people through their study is not entirely misplaced. He rightly points out that Indigenous archaeologists should always work towards creating an inclusive practice

that avoids making broad conclusions about Indigenous cultures from the past or present (McGhee 2008).

The second key concept in the context of this essay is the plurality of Indigenous archaeologies, which fundamentally combats aboriginalist conclusions. Much like any post-processualist archaeology, Indigenous archaeologies have no single coherent theoretical base (Johnson 2010:105). Rather, Indigenous archaeologies approach their study in individualistic ways in order to fit the needs of each unique community involved (Johnson 2010:208-210). In essence, by creating an individual archaeology sensitive to the past of each unique community, archaeologists can create inclusive and considerate understandings of Indigenous pasts (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et. al 2010). Understanding Indigenous archaeologies is a fundamental requirement for the examination of how ontological studies have been applied to investigations of Inuit pasts. Inuit people have lived all across the Canadian arctic for hundreds of years, maintaining distinct Inuit identities despite splitting into several groups with unique geographic identities (Betts 2007, 2005; Stewart et. al 2004; Collignon 2006; MacKay et. al 2013). Archaeological sciences have been able to understand that past Inuit peoples have always been highly mobile and dependent on seasonal resources because of the nature of the arctic landscape. However, what they have not been able to explain is how Inuit peoples relationships with their landscapes and resources express active agency in different and more direct ways than Western scientists are able to comprehend (Banting 2013; Castro et. al 2016). New applications of actor-network theory, in which the agency of other-than-human beings, materials and products are considered equal to that of humans, have the potential to illuminate academic understandings of archaeological cultures in the arctic (Jackson 2015). Ethnographically, there is ample evidence to support this epistemological divide in which animals, objects and landscapes are understood as much more active agents directly related to human and other than human interactions (MacKay et. al 2013; Collignon 2006).

Bernard Saladin D'Anglure, a Canadian anthropologist, has been producing Inuit ethnographies for many decades. In one such ethnography, published in 1994, he detailed the significance and agency of the *nanook* in Inuit oral tradition. In this case, the word *nanook* refers to the same biological animal as the polar bear, but expresses a different reality in which this animal exists (D'Anglure 1994:178). In fact, oral tradition explains that both *nanook* and *Inuk* (humans) were permeable categories of being in ancient times. What made one be a bear, or be a human, was that they acted bear-like or human-like. Consequentially, humans and bears could not only speak, but also interbreed and transform into one another with ease (D'Anglure 1994:169-171,173-174). The tradition goes on to explain that this connection was eventually severed. Nevertheless, the relational understanding that no being is superior to any other being, but rather that beings choose to act in distinct manners, remains a central aspect of Inuit ontology.

Transformative relational ontologies are not entirely unique to Inuit cultures. In the arctic archaeological record, the agential role of animals is expressed in fairly consistent ways across different ethnic groups who have traditionally followed similar modes of subsistence. For example, the pastoral Chukchi and their hunter-gatherer Eskimo¹ counterparts were in frequent contact with one another along the Bering Strait, often sharing cultural practices (Hill

¹ The term "Eskimo" is largely understood as being derogatory and is in no way representative of modern Inuit identities. I use it here in this essay because of the reference source from which I obtained this example, which uses the term to describe a multiethnic compilation of mobile hunter-gatherer pre-Inuit people in the north-western American arctic.

2011:416,419). Significantly, pre-historic reindeer herding Chukchi sites commonly include reindeer sacrifices, whereas reindeer hunting Eskimo sites never express evidence of sacrificial practices. The two groups of people were not segregated from each other, and often traded cultural practices. The ontological nature of mobile hunter gatherer people necessitates a co-operative understanding of animal agency but sacrifice, on the other hand, requires an ontological perception of human dominance over another being as made possible by pastoralism (Hill 2011). As such, the two groups were unable to transmit this particular practice, and the presence of sacrifice in Chukchi sites reveals important information about their ontological relationships with the world (Hill 2011).

Labrador Innu people express similar ontological expressions of animal agency. For example, Labrador's declining caribou populations have been recently discussed by the Canadian government, but these animals are entirely different from Innu herds of active, intelligent, and kindred *Atik* (Castro et. al 2016). Innu people have traditionally hunted *Atik* (caribou) with a reciprocal relationship. The practice has unfortunately experienced a severe decline throughout the 20th century when Canadian relocation and residential school policies negatively impacted Innu lifeways. In 2013, the hunt experienced an almost complete halt when the Canadian government declared caribou to be an endangered species and made the hunt illegal (Castro et. al 2016). Nonetheless, Innu stories and histories still reflect the reciprocal and communicative understanding required to coexist with the large animals they hunted. They still perceive the *Atik* to be sentient and emotional beings which allow hunters to catch them out of respect for their role in the world (Castro et. al 2016:106). While it is short-sighted and essentialist to equate Inuit ontologies with the ontologies of other arctic peoples, there are pieces of evidence that show how pre-historic Inuit cultures experienced environments in similar ways.

Inuit people across the arctic have a wide network of named and unnamed landmarks passed down through oral histories and traditions. However, the value and significance of these place name networks and the role they play in arctic life have long been ignored by scholars studying the area (Collignon 2006:187-188). This highlights another epistemological divide between modern archaeologists and the ancient archaeological cultures they study, in which mobility plays a large role in how we interact with the environment. Today, archaeologists working in the north are flown into the remote sites in which they excavate. While archaeologists dig in these environments, they do not experience them in the same way as the cultures they study did. This separation prevents archaeologists from identifying some potentially important features in the broader landscapes (Banting 2013:410).

This distinct lack of understanding between Inuit memory and Western study was pointed out in 2004 by Andrew M. Stewart, Darren Keith, and Joan Scottie. These three archaeologists conducted a preliminary survey of a site along the Kazan River in Canada, where they identified sites and site structures in the environment for archaeological assessment. They then brought in a series of Inuit elders to interpret the landscape once more. The sites had still been in use up until the 1960s. Therefore many of the elders had lived at the sites and some even had memories of cached objects which were recovered throughout the surveys (Stewart et. al 2004:201). Ultimately, Stewart, Keith, and Scottie were able to conclude that archaeological assessments of mobile Indigenous sites lack epistemological capabilities to identify all of the features present. This means that, although archaeologists may try to understand the environment they are studying, their lack of familiarity and their different understandings of what it means to live in that environment prevents them from understanding archaeological remains in wholly accurate ways.

The magnitude of the meaning of arctic landscapes in relation to Inuit people is visible when considering the names of places and their function. Western place names in the arctic have little significance to the places which they are ascribed to. On the other hand, Inuit place names describe the landscape with purpose and intent (Stewart et. al 2004; Collignon 2006). Purpose and intent, however, do not necessarily refer to the function of a place. In fact, the most important named places often serve little practical function, and are significant for their role in the transmission oral traditions and histories (Collignon 2006:199-200). The importance of a place ultimately rests in its relationship with the people who use it and understand it as important aspects of their lives. Thus, the environment and landscape form a relational network with both individuals and cultures (Collignon 2006:204).

In the case of the ancestors of Inuvialuit (Mackenzie Inuit) people, who lived along the Mackenzie Delta between ca. AD 1250 to 1890, a specific relationship between Vihtr'ii Tshik chert and the landscape is evident in the archaeological record (MacKay et. al 2013:484,485, 493). Specifically, the fact that Inuvialuit sites are dominated by the Vihtr'ii Tshick chert, despite the quarry being located at the mouth of Thunder River 400km from the coast, indicates that this particular chert from this particular place had some sort of significance to the people using it. Additionally, the quarry site was well within the boundaries of Dene people, and the name Samba K'e Got'ine oral traditions use for the quarry site literally translates to "killing each other for it" (MacKay et. al 2013:484,487). Archaeologists can see that this chert expresses material agency over the people who used it because it is located in a distant, potentially hostile area. By choosing to prioritise this resource over any other pre-historic² Inuit people equally express the meaning behind the relationship they had with the landscape. Consequentially, the location from which the chert was acquired holds agency and is central in the oral traditions of several current peoples who use the area. This agency and how it is expressed is related to each group's understanding of the material resource and the significance of its location. This means that, without the material the location is no longer significant, that the material would no longer hold the same significance in a different location, and that without the network of people using both the material and location individual understandings of the place would change (MacKay et. al 2013; Jackson 2015).

Mobility and human-landscape relationships are clearly important to both the meaning behind material resources, place and space, and to other than human relations. New methods in archaeology should therefore seriously consider re-approaching the topic of mobility and its importance to the production of knowledge and ontology. For example, in 2003 Karsten Heuer and Leanne Allison followed the porcupine caribou herd for five months throughout the Canadian and American arctic in order to collect scientific information (Banting 2013:407-408). As the pair followed the herd by foot, they experienced a transformative change in their ontological understanding of the land and the animals. By experiencing the world alongside the animals and experiencing the landscape, they recorded that they ultimately felt they were able to "become" caribou (Banting 2013). The experience they recorded sees them slowly adjust their understanding of Western human/animal division. The caribou they followed became intelligent beings with which they could communicate and understand (Banting 2013:428). While this transformative experience is not equivalent to the experiences of past Indigenous people, by acting through the environment in a similar way a shift in Heuer and Allison's ontological and

² The term "pre-historic" is used here to refer to people prior to European contact and written documentation, a rich history of the area and of Inuit past exists in the oral historical record which should not be ignored. This note should appear after the first use of "pre-historic" on page 4.

epistemological understanding of the environment occurred. This shift provides archaeologists and other academics with insight into much more empathetic and communicative explanations of how relational ontologies develop and are experienced within an arctic environment.

It would be narrow-sighted for archaeologists to call for more experiential studies to further our ontological understandings without considering the ontologies of the modern descendants of these cultures. Referring back to the previously mentioned 2004 study by Stewart, Keith, and Scottie, there is clearly an important relationship between Inuit people today and the landscape in which they live that holds a wealth of information useful for archaeological inquiries. Ontological inquiries therefore require the application of Indigenous archaeologies as proposed earlier. Archaeologists cannot expect to understand the pasts of Indigenous people in meaningful ways without the use of aforementioned specific Indigenous archaeologies. The heavy use of collaborative and inclusive interpretations is essential to avoid aboriginalist conclusions (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et. al 2010; Wilcox 2010).

In the case of Inuit heritage and their ancestral archaeological cultures, there is a clear division between “native” and anthropological ontological understandings of the world rooted in how each moves and experiences the world. Subsistence practices and mobility affect the way in which the world is perceived and the way in which individual realities are created. While the majority of this essay has been asserted the importance of archaeological to consideration and collaboration with Inuit oral traditions, histories, and people, it has not yet considered the issues of interpretive contradiction. In the spirit of multiple ontologies and the related assertion that multiple realities exist (Harris and Robb 2012), what appears here to be a major issue is actually negligible. Just as archaeological understandings of the world are created for and by western perspectives of scientific inquiry with distinctly divergent goals and purposes from any Indigenous ontologies, the way in which these divergent conclusions are used change their significances. For example, the Inuit legends of *nanook* which could become humans, and humans which could become *nanook*, serve not only to explain the physical world, but also the individual *Inuk*'s relationship with both physical and ethereal worlds (D'Anglure 1994; Collignon 2006). However, archaeological explanations aim to understand how past cultures existed and experienced the physical world as it happened materially, not necessarily considering that the meaning of the material may not equate with the meaning of the ethereal. As such, while archaeological inquiry must depend on Inuit input, contradictions between Inuit and archaeological conclusions about the physical world should not be considered oppositional, but rather complimentary. Hence, the differences between these explanations of reality are created with and for separate motivations and objectives.

This essay has examined how archaeologists approach arctic research, using Indigenous archaeologies, ethnographic analyses, and material studies to help highlight where epistemological disparities between western and Indigenous ontologies exist. It has also established the successes landscape analyses, experimental methods, and co-operative interpretations have had in answering complex questions of ontology and epistemology. Ultimately, this has proven that Inuit and archaeological experiences are not equivalent to one another, but that both produce equally valid explanations of the world and of past cultures and people. As such, careful, considerate, and cooperative ontological analyses are necessary to consider in all archaeological analyses of past Inuit cultures and people in order to understand where and why different conclusions about the nature of the world exist. By promoting ontological analyses in archaeology the basis for a more compassionate discipline which promotes the significance of Indigenous oral history and traditions can be established. Most

importantly, by asserting the distinct separation and validity of multiple ontologies using the hegemonic discourse created by western science, archaeologists can assert the equal validity of Indigenous perspectives beyond academia in a world in which they are devalued. Ontological inquiries into the nature of being and experience are therefore critical not only for archaeological discourse about past cultures, but also for the current political validation of Indigenous peoples' self-identification, history, and autonomy.

References Cited

D'Anglure, Bernard Saladin

1994. Nanook, Super-Male: The Polar Bear in the Imaginary Space and Social Time of the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic. In *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*, edited by Roy Willis, pp. 169-185. Routledge, London.

Banting, Pamela

2013. The Ontology and Epistemology of Walking: Animality in Karsten Heuer's Being Caribou: Five Months on Foot with an Arctic Herd. In *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context*, edited by Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley, pp. 407-437. University of Calgary Press, Calgary.

Betts, Matthew W.

2005. Seven Focal Economies for Six Focal Places: The Development of Economic Diversity in the Western Canadian Arctic. *Arctic Anthropology* 42(1):47-87.

2007. The Mackenzie Inuit Whale Bone Industry: Raw Material, Tool Manufacture, Scheduling, and Trade. *Arctic* 60(2):129-144.

Castro, Damian, Kamrul Hossain, and Carolina Tytelman

2016. Arctic Ontologies: Reframing the Relationship Between Humans and Rangifer. *Polar Geography* 32(9):98-112.

Collignon, Beatrice

2006. Inuit Place Names and Sense of Place. In *Critical Inuit Studies: An Anthology of Contemporary Arctic Ethnography*, edited by Pamela R. Stern and Lisa Stevenson, pp. 187-205. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

Colwell-Chanthaphonh, Chip, T. J. Ferguson, Dorothy Lippert, Randall H. McGuire, George P. Nicholas, Joe E. Watkins and Larry T. Zimmerman

2010. The Premise and Promise of Indigenous Archaeology. *American Antiquity* 75(2):228-238.

Harris, Oliver J. T., and John Robb

2012. Multiple Ontologies and the Problem of the Body in History. *American Anthropologist* 114(4):668-679.

Hill, Erica

2011. Animals as Agents: Hunting Ritual and Relational Ontologies in Prehistoric Alaska and Chukotka. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 21(3):407-426.

Jackson, Sharon

2015. Toward an Analytical and Methodological Understanding of Actor-Network Theory. *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4(2):29-44.

Johnson, Matthew

2010. *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester.

- MacKay, Glen, Adrian L. Burke, Gilles Gauthier, and Charles D. Arnold
2013. Mackenzie Inuit Lithic Raw Material Procurement in the Lower Mackenzie Valley: The Importance of Social Factors. *Arctic* 66(4):483-499.
- McGhee, Robert
2008. Aboriginalism and the Problems of Indigenous Archaeology. *American Antiquity* 73(4):579-597.
- Stewart, Andrew M., Darren Keith, and Joan Scottie
2004. Caribou Crossings and Cultural Meanings: Placing Traditional Knowledge and Archaeology in Context in an Inuit Landscape. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 11:183-211.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo
2013. The Relative Native. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(3):469-502.
- Wilcox, Michael
2010. Saving Indigenous Peoples From Ourselves: Separate but Equal Archaeology is Not Scientific Archaeology. *American Antiquity* 75(2):221-227.