

FELIPE ROJAS, BYRON ELLSWORTH
HAMANN, AND BENJAMIN ANDERSON
(EDS.), *OTROS PASADOS. ONTOLOGÍAS
ALTERNATIVAS Y EL ESTUDIO DE LO
QUE HA SIDO*

Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, Ediciones Uniandes, Fondo de Promoción de la Cultura 2022, 372 pages with 51 color and 19 b/w ill. and 4 tables, ISBN 978-958-9003-93-0 (Hardback).



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The ‘past’ used to be the exclusive domain of historians and archeologists, even geologists or paleontologists: those thought to have the tools that could unveil its mysteries and the ‘truth’ of what has been. This notion, common in Western cultures, does not, however, apply to how other cultures view and how they understand their own history. Nor does it apply to how pre-modern Western cultures studied their own histories. Our relationship to the past is always transforming and the recent book, *Otros pasados. Ontologías alternativas y el estudio de lo que ha sido* (Other Past. Alternative Ontologies and the Study of What Has Been) is an excellent example of how different perspectives and disciplines have dealt with diverging approaches to studying and understanding history. Reading and discussing the book also affords an opportunity to question whether the past (in all of the manifold forms of historical understanding) can be fully comprehended as well as whether an analysis of multi-

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ple notions of historical understanding can be fruitfully placed into dialogue with one another.

As the title of the book underscores, the authors understand history as a plurality, belonging to different actors, who have approached it by studying either buried objects, ancient texts, or through living creatures and marks in the landscapes that co-exist with us in the present. Following this principle, eleven study cases were selected. Researchers from different backgrounds – half from Latin America – analyzed these cases with an eye to how studies of a broad range of time periods and geographical areas can shed light on different cultural approaches to the *matter* of history. From medieval China and the sixteenth-century central Andes to current Wajapi Amazonian indigenous communities, a resolutely polyphonic approach to “what has been” serves as the guiding principle of this volume. Moreover, one of the book’s most innovative aspects is the conscious effort to ensure a horizontal reading of all views, without privileging one above others. Accordingly, the order of the case studies seems aleatory, jumping from America to Asia, to Europe and back to the Middle East through different time periods. An effort is made neither to follow a chronological or spatial thread nor to suggest a predetermined trajectory that might purport to resolve contesting visions of the past.

The contributions stem from a conference which took place in 2017, organized by the MUSA Archaeological Museum and the Universidad de Los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia. The volume also builds upon a previous book by two of the editors entitled *Antiquarianisms. Contact-Conflict-Comparison*, which invited its readers to consider the different interests and discourses of antiquarians and their use(s) of the past.¹ This current book, unlike its predecessor, does not deal only with antiquarians, but counts among the authors representatives from other disciplinary fields including history, art history, archeology, anthropology, and linguistics.

In the last three decades, discussions in social sciences and humanities, especially in Latin America, have increasingly dealt with the issue of how to incorporate alternative ontologies in research studies. This current book adds to this endeavor through its specific consideration of discourses and uses of history. As the editors and some of the authors recognize, there is an important theoretical framework to which their work makes a specific contribution: the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology. The latter has been a growing subject of interest in Latin America, particularly since the late 1990s, when foundational ethnographic studies – particularly in the Amazonian region – embraced ‘perspectivism’ and its variants as a way to comprehend Amerindian ways of thinking and worlding, as proposed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Philippe Descola, Eduardo Kohn, and Matei Candea.

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Benjamin Anderson and Felipe Rojan (eds.), *Antiquarianisms. Contact, Conflict, Comparison*, Oxford/Havertown, PA 2017.

Ethnographic research with contemporary indigenous communities in the Amazonian region has inspired academics to interrogate the nature/culture divide and with it, notions on agency associated with natural phenomena and even artifacts, as in Fernando Santos-Granero's key study *The Occult Life of Things. Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood*.² Encouraged by these seminal studies, the authors of this compilation go beyond the Amazon and also expand the scope of objects examined to include art, linguistic terms, and landscape features in order to more fully flesh out different cultural practices of marking history for present and future generations.

The various case studies assembled here furnish convincing evidence of how, even in the West, the past was often approached through an experiential filter that required visiting and moving through certain landscapes, re-enacting past events through bodily practices. Key chapters by Byron Ellsworth Hamann and Jeffrey Moser, both associated with ancient religious beliefs and rites, discuss how ceremonies and peregrinations were performed and re-enacted in the present in order to remember and revitalize the past and faith itself. Catholic festivities in the Iberoamerican world in the sixteenth century used commemorations such as the *via crucis* to keep alive such pagan traditions, deeply entangled in the new religious order, making it difficult to differentiate past and present beliefs. Moser's chapter is of special interest for art historians since it uses a Buddhist monumental sculpture and its geological properties as a medium to evaluate ancient ontologies of history and the materiality associated with mnemonic and symbolic practices; these included the representation of divinities in durable materials located in landscapes through which pilgrimage routes were traced.

Another chapter that treats the connection between the ways in which perceptions of history manifested itself through physical landmarks is the one written by Steve Kosiba, which takes place in the Central Andes in the Inca period (ca. CE 1438–1533). In here, *huacas* or sacred landmarks, were connected through a *ceque* or network design to indicate ways to move through the territory visiting a thread of sacred points which conveyed history. The pilgrimage to these places was intended to commemorate ancestors – who were still understood as part of present everyday life – as well as to directly connect travelers with key historical events. The *huacas* were, and are, both objects and subjects of history, and the spatial component of the past was as equally important to the culture that made them as a chronological experience of events. The physical experience of space and time simultaneously aimed to incite a direct interaction with the past.

Building a connection to the past through the construction of certain monuments or marks in the landscape is just one of many ways that various cultures have sought to establish connections to

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Fernando Santos-Granero (ed.), *The Occult Life of Things. Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood*, Tucson, AZ 2009.

the ones that came before us. The chapters by Felipe Rojas, Benjamin Anderson, and Alain Schnapp each explore the concept of the ruin as a way to access the past and create political discourse which defends a particular reconstruction of events in a concrete socio-political context. Some ruins are stone structures, funerary tumuli, or ancient bronze sculptures such as the *Quimera*, studied by Vasari in the sixteenth century. Despite their various origins and time periods, in each of these cases, however, the interpretations of the remnants of ancient civilizations were used to suggest alternate stories, wherein for instance Babylonians or Etruscans were key actors in the beginning of arts, architecture, and language, even in Mesoamerica where Toltec pyramids were recognized as possible ancient Ziggurats made by ancient middle easterners. These ancient connections signal temporally deep non-Western connections between cultures, which suggest an alternate universal global history that existed parallel to the better-known Greco-Roman-centric models. This type of instrumental use of history is also tackled in Carl Langebaek's chapter, which presents a non-evolutionary historic discourse proposed by the recently independent *criollos* in early nineteenth-century Colombia. Here, the local indigenous past was carefully manipulated and curated – without scientific basis – to support the construction of an idyllic future society that contained the best features of both indigenous and Spanish cultures.

The remaining chapters present a variety of modes and media of approaching the past, ranging from linguistics and living animal remains to modern fossils. Juan Camilo Niño's chapter uses *chibcha* language, spoken by indigenous groups from the intermediate area (southern Mesoamerica and northern South America), to analyze anthropocentric historic models in which humans are understood as constituting the present stage of living beings, while past and future oscillate between vegetable and animal forms. Another compelling case study, by Irina Podgorny, uses fossils discovered in the nineteenth century of a bird from the North Atlantic – the *Alca impennis* – that went extinct due to both biological and commercial causes. The discovery of modern extinctions changed the way in which we approach the distant past and our own future, in which more species (including humans) could meet their end. Mariana Petry Cabral's chapter on the Jacamín bird, identified by the Wajapi indigenous people in Northern Amazon, analyzes an animal that is also a living archeological vestige: the bird that lives among them in the present is also the product of a primordial mythical feast, evidence of past historic events.

Last but not least, a short text by Santiago Giraldo, which acts as a sort of epilogue, poses a question to a Kogui indigenous teacher in charge of a history course for the children in his community. Virgilio, a man that moves in both the indigenous and the mainstream world, says he can teach both the Kogui and the official version of history in parallel, using a lower-case “h” to assert the plurality of versions. However, Giraldo acknowledges there are translation problems when it comes to harmonizing ancestral divine/mythical

stories with the Western official models of successive events – based on archeological finds – and the role of the past in our future.

This last aspect in particular – that is, the challenge of working with *and* between different versions of the past as proposed as a goal in the introduction of the book – remains nonetheless somewhat elusive and not fully addressed by the authors and editors. The book certainly does not aim to build a consensus. Its goal is rather to provide a platform that showcases a polyphony of views on history, as discussed here. However, the dialogue which the authors and editors aim to encourage is left to the reader, who is given the responsibility of building connections and finding commonalities as well as differences that explain our variable and transformative relationship to the past.

The book is oriented to a specialized academic audience, which means that the texts demand close and attentive reading. But it is also an enjoyable and edifying read that would certainly make itself available to a broader, non-specialized audience as well. It will hopefully also inspire readers to develop new critical perspectives on historical discourse – on a global scale that incorporates and challenges singular accounts of the past. After reading this volume, one is obliged to think about history no longer as simply a matter of *time*, but also a matter of *place, people, practices, artifacts, animals, plants, landscapes, and language*; as well as, of course, a political and social discourse that invests in certain stories rather than others. The key takeaway: there are plenty of versions of the past, and almost as many presents and futures as we desire.