Scratching the surface
Reassembling an archaeology
in and of the present

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Introduction
This chapter has its origins in questions which have arisen from within the subfield of archaeology which has become known as the ‘archaeology of the contemporary past’, but addresses epistemological issues which concern archaeology and its relationship to modernity more generally. It explores a central paradox in the aims of the archaeology of the contemporary past as they have been articulated by its practitioners. On the one hand, its aim has been expressed as one of making the familiar ‘unfamiliar’, of distancing the observer from their own material world; a work of alienation. On the other hand, it has also aimed to make the past more accessible and egalitarian; to recover lost, subaltern voices and in this way to close the distance between past and present. I argue that this paradox arises from archaeology’s relationship with modernity and the past itself, as a result of its investment in the modern trope of archaeology-as-excavation and the idea of a past which is buried and hidden. One way of overcoming this paradox would be to emphasize an alternative trope of archaeology-as-surface-survey (see also Kobialka, Graves-Brown and Gnecce this volume) and a process of assembling/reassembling, and indeed to shift away from the idea of an ‘archaeology of the contemporary past’ to speak instead of an archaeology ‘in and of the present’. This would reorient archaeology so that it is seen primarily as a creative engagement with the present and only subsequently as a consideration of the spaces in which traces of the past intervene within it. It is only by doing this that archaeology will develop into a discipline which can successfully address itself to the present and future concerns of contemporary societies. Such a move not only has implications for archaeologies of the present and recent past, but concerns the very nature and practice of archaeology as a discipline in its broadest sense in the twenty-first century.

Archaeology, alienation and the ruins of modernity
The archaeology of the contemporary past has generally expressed its aim as one of making the familiar ‘unfamiliar’ (Graves-Brown 2000; Buchli and Lucas 2001: 9; Hicks and Beaudry 2006; Piccini and Holtorf 2009; Hicks 2010; Graves-Brown 2011). This aim acknowledges archaeology as a discipline which creates distance between its object and the archaeologist-as-observer.
In a very real sense, this is what many archaeologists have sought to do through their work on the recent past and present – to draw attention to the everyday by making it ‘uncanny’ and to explore archaeology itself as a contemporary cultural phenomenon. One of the problems is that in doing so, archaeologies of the contemporary past have played out one of the fundamental modern underpinnings of the discipline – the production of a past which is distant, alien and ‘other’ to ourselves (Graves-Brown 2011; Gnecco this volume). This has undermined any aim which the archaeology of the contemporary past might have of reducing the distance between past and present, and making the past more accessible, egalitarian or knowable.

Another aim of the archaeology of the contemporary past has been articulated most strongly by Alfredo González-Ruibal (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; González-Ruibal and Hernando 2010; see also Andreassen, Bjerck and Olsen 2010), and concerns its sustained critique of modernity. He argues that the role of the archaeology of the contemporary past should be to emphasize modernity as an ‘unfinished project’ (cf. Latour 1993; Law 1994) by drawing attention to its fragile underpinnings. In González-Ruibal’s work, ruin becomes a symbol of the failure of the project of modernity, and drawing attention to ruin forces an engagement with the idea that modernity is not universal or inevitable. However, one of the problems with the way in which many archaeologists have tended to engage with modern ruins is that they have often been drawn into a mode of representation where modern ruins are aestheticized and equated with romantic notions of the ruin. The trope of ‘modernity-in-ruin’ places modernity itself in the past, making it appear both inevitable and uncomplicated, as yet another aspect of human social evolutionary history. One of the ways the archaeology of the contemporary past has implicated itself in this process is through its relationship with a particular mode of photography which presents ruin in an explicitly nostalgic manner, and in the process romanticizes it. This style of photography is perhaps exemplified by the work of photographer Robert Polidori (e.g. 1993), in which the elegance and romanticism of ruination is often emphasized, and where the modern ruin can be read as a reflection on the distance between the present and recent past and the speed of modern social and technological change (itself another form of modern distancing – Virilio 1986; Tomlinson 2007). This nostalgic mode of representation is part of a broader interest in the ‘beauty’ of modern urban ruination which also finds expression among contemporary ‘urban explorers’ and other amateur and professional urban photographers. Dawdy (2010) has noted the ways in which archaeologists have become deeply invested in the idea of a rupture between antiquity and modernity which such a mode of engagement tends to emphasize. By representing modernity as past and in ruin, there is a danger that it is simultaneously domesticated and made to appear both inevitable and benign.

Thomas (2004, 2009; see also Olsen and Svestad 1994; Shanks, Platt and Rathje 2004; Witmore 2006a) has argued that archaeology is intimately connected with modernity; indeed, that archaeology could only have emerged as a distinct discipline under the particular social and intellectual conditions of modernity. He points not only to the connection between archaeology and the foundation stories of modern nation-states, but the reliance within archaeological thought on distinctively modern perceptions of the relationship between new knowledge and material things. He also notes the ways in which archaeology (and ‘excavation’ in particular) has continually been drawn upon by other modern disciplines as a metaphor for understanding the relationship between knowledge and its intellectual pursuit, through a string of linked images relating to concealment and discovery. He sees archaeology and modernity as connected by a series of preoccupations, including the ordering of time, the idea of a normative with which to contrast a non-normative (or ‘Other’), with ideas of human development, the relationship between historical change and human reason, and analytical and comparative perspectives (Thomas 2004: 224–226).
For Gavin Lucas, the central problem of modernity revolved around the search for a new authority on the past, and the creation of a field of prehistory which was defined as the study of material culture which had been removed from the realm of tradition and sat outside it (2004). In contrast, he suggests that the archaeology of the very recent past should be seen as an engagement with an unconstituted present. This forces us to pay attention to the way in which archaeology is a mode of cultural production in the present (Lucas 2004: 118). I would like to add something to Lucas’ discussion by suggesting that in undertaking an archaeology of the present, we not only expose the present as partial and emergent, but can also explore the way in which modernity itself can be argued to be incomplete (after Latour 1993; Law 1994; Scott 1998). This shifts us away from an idea of the archaeology of the present as an investigation into modernity ‘in decline’ (Harrison and Schofield 2010), towards the archaeology of the present as an investigation into modernity as partial, fragile and unfinished. However to do this we must engage with modernity in very particular ways – not as something which is romantically falling into ruin, and hence both inevitable and anaesthetized against its influence in the present, but rather the opposite, as an unrealized social and material project. Only in this way can we fulfil the potential for archaeology to undermine the project of modernity by drawing attention to its failings and fragile underpinnings (see also González-Ruibal 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008; Dawdy 2010). By focusing on modernity as an active and unfinished project, we raise the spectre of an archaeology which engages explicitly with the future (see also Dawdy 2009). In this sense, such an archaeology could realize the sorts of ontologies of the future which have been advocated by contemporary cultural critics such as Frederic Jameson (2005) and others (e.g. Augé 2004; see also Graves-Brown 2009).

Such an approach seems, to me, to be beyond objection. In addition to undermining modernity itself, it would allow us to engage with various aspects of the project of modernity in which archaeology has become deeply implicated, in particular its association with the foundation stories of modern nation-states (Appadurai 2001; Schnapp, Shanks and Tiews 2004: 1), its mobilization of a unilinear discourse of human development (Thomas 2004: 225), its production of otherness (e.g. Thomas 1991) and its yearning for the reconstruction of completeness (Hamilakis 2004: 55). However, I agree with Thomas (2004: 224) that this is not about abandoning archaeology entirely, but a project of reworking archaeology so that it produces a more embodied, diverse, even egalitarian engagement with the everyday past, highlighting its imminence and our role in its production in the present. Our aim should be to foreground the archaeology of the present within our discipline to produce an archaeology of everyday presents and possible futures; an archaeology for and of ‘now’. This does not require us to look outside archaeology for a new series of metaphors or tropes. Indeed, these are to be found in an emphasis on the trope of archaeology-as-surface survey in preference to the trope of archaeology-as-excavation, and by drawing on the idea of archaeology as a process of assembling and reassembling. I outline these alternate metaphors for an archaeology in and of the present in more detail below.

The tropes of archaeology: excavation, surface survey and assemblage analysis

So far I have argued, following others (Thomas 2004; Shanks, Platt and Rathje 2004; Lucas 2004, 2006), that archaeology, as a modern discipline par excellence, has consistently appealed to a series of linked metaphors – excavation, stratigraphy, typology, discovery and the search for origins. In doing so, it has sought to produce a present which is disengaged from the past. I want to suggest here that if we were to re-imagine an archaeology which eschews this obsession with stratigraphic depth for an emphasis on the present and its surfaces, we might help create a more
socially useful and future-oriented archaeology. Drawing on Lucas’ discussion of archaeology as an engagement with an unconstituted present (2004), I suggest that archaeology must be viewed in the first instance as a critical engagement with the present and only subsequently as a consideration of the spaces in which the past intervenes within it. To utilize a familiar archaeological metaphor, I propose that we think of the present as a surface – a physical stratum that contains not only the present itself, but all its physical and imagined pasts combined (see also Olivier 2000, 2011; Witmore 2004; González-Ruibal 2008: 262; Schnapp, Shanks and Tiews 2004: 10; Harrison and Schofield 2010: 283). In focusing our attention on the present and its surfaces, I suggest two alternative metaphors to excavation which derive directly from archaeology itself – surface survey and the assemblage – to help frame this model.

Archaeology as surface survey

Lucas (2001; see also Trigger 1996; Lucas 2005) has shown how the invention of stratigraphic excavation as a field method was central to the development of evolutionary models in archaeology. Thomas (2004) writes that the depth/surface metaphor of archaeology was subsequently drawn upon to provide an allegory for the modern pursuit of knowledge more generally, exploring Freud’s work as an ‘archaeology of the mind’ by way of example (see also Thomas 2009). From this discussion, he concludes

> It could be argued that the disciplinary orientation towards depth, concealment, mystery and revelation is quite obstructive, for it enhances a belief that the past is entirely separate from the present: it is ‘somewhere else’ that needs to be accessed in a particular way. This essentialist view of the past could be compared with the post-Cartesian view of the mind, hidden away in the interior of the person. In the same way, it is unhelpful to imagine that the past is a substance that is secreted in dark places awaiting its recovery. The remains of the past are all around us, and we inhabit the past in important ways. (Thomas 2004: 170; original emphasis)

While excavation is perhaps most well known as a metaphor for archaeological investigation, surface survey has always played an important role in the discipline (e.g. Cherry 2003). Field walking, surface site distribution mapping and aerial reconnaissance have played an equally important role alongside excavation in the production of archaeological knowledge. If we begin to think of the surface as a metaphor for an unconstituted present, a space in which the past, present and future are combined and which is still in the process of becoming, archaeological surface survey emerges as an allegory for a creative engagement with the present and the spaces in which the past intervenes within it. Like the traces of field ditches and embankments that archaeologists reconstruct from aerial surface survey, archaeology can only engage with the past where it is visible at the surface, refracted through the lens of the present. In this way, archaeology becomes a discipline which turns its attention to the surfaces of things, to the ‘here’ and ‘now’. Archaeology is no longer a trope for alienation and estrangement, but becomes present and future centred. It is no longer about an ‘other’, but instead about ‘us’ (see also Gnecco this volume).

Archaeology as the study of surface assemblages and a process of assembling/reassembling

In thinking of the trope of archaeology as surface survey, it is also helpful to consider another metaphor of the assemblage, a conventional way of thinking about the material remains which
are found together on the surface of an archaeological site. Indeed, I want to go further to explore the trope of archaeology as a process of the study of surface assemblages, and of assembling and reassembling. Doing this helps shift the emphasis away from the metaphor of stratigraphic depth to focus our attention on the present and its material remains, to ‘flatten’ our engagement with the surface, both in terms of stratigraphy as well as in terms of the asymmetries in our practice which emphasize the agency of humans over the agencies of other elements of the material world. In doing so, I refer to a notion of assemblage which is both specifically archaeological but which simultaneously draws on a Deleuzean notion of the assemblage by way of Manuel De Landa’s ‘assemblage theory’ (2006; Bennett 2010; see further discussion in Harrison 2012) and which incorporates a sense of the symmetrical relationships between people and things (after Latour 1993, 2005; Murdoch 1997; Serres 2008; see Olsen 2010; Webmoor 2006b; Webmoor and Witmore 2008).

The first way of understanding the term ‘assemblage’ is a familiar archaeological one, in which the assemblage is defined as a group of artefacts found in association with each other in a single context. The formation of an archaeological assemblage is perceived to be the result of both natural and cultural processes. Michael Schiffer (1972) famously described the taphonomic processes by which a group of things are transformed into an archaeological assemblage by way of cultural (‘C-transforms’) and natural (‘N-transforms’) transformations. He referred to this as the movement from the systemic context (the original set of relationships between human behaviours and material things) to the archaeological context (the archaeological assemblage which is studied by the archaeologist). ‘C-transforms’ include a range of cultural processes, such as intentional or non-intentional discard, recycling or re-use, while ‘N-transforms’ include processes such as biological and chemical weathering and decay. In surface survey, the context is more complex than in stratified deposits, and in the case of a deflated surface, the surface assemblage might contain a mix of artefacts from a number of different time periods. Such archaeological sites might be understood as palimpsests, the assemblages at the surface of which are mixed and contain traces from a number of different occupations that are jumbled together. Implicit within the archaeological use of the term is the idea of the assemblage as a contemporary construction, i.e. the assemblage is created as part of an engagement of an archaeologist’s contemporary classificatory gaze and the sensuous engagement of the body (Edgeworth this volume) with a series of material remains from the past. It arises out of the relationship between past and present, and between a contemporary external observer and a set of activities carried out by particular people and particular ‘things’ in the past (e.g. Shanks 1992; Shanks and McGuire 1996; Pearson and Shanks 2001).

The second notion of the assemblage draws on Manuel De Landa’s (2006; see also Bennett 2010) articulation of Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘assemblage theory’. Deleuze and Guattari (e.g. 2004) used the term ‘assemblage’ to refer to a series of heterogeneous groupings in which the grouping itself could be distinguished as a whole from the sum of its parts. Importantly, such groupings are mixed, and social or cultural groupings are not distinguished from natural ones (or vice versa). Assemblage theory exists as an alternative to the metaphor of society as a living organism which has dominated social theory throughout the twentieth century. De Landa (2006) shows how replacing the organismic metaphor with that of an assemblage has a series of implications for the way in which we study material and social relationships in the past and present. Thinking of assemblages as heterogeneous groupings of humans and non-humans has the effect of flattening the hierarchy of relationships which exists within modern, post-Enlightenment philosophies which separate matter and mind (e.g. Latour 1993, 2005; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Harvey 2005; Serres 2008). This progresses an earlier stated aim of moving away from an idea of the past and present as stratified, towards a notion of the past and present
as a single surface. In the same way that the past is immanent within the present on this surface plane, all of the components of the assemblages at the surface are equally implicated in the production of the past and present. Bennett’s (2010) discussion of assemblage theory also draws out another key issue. In thinking of the present as a series of heterogeneous socio-technical assemblages, unlike the organismic metaphor, we are able to identify both relationships of functional flow, as well as more volatile relationships of friction and conflict (2010: 23). In perceiving social groupings as organisms, we tend to emphasize the relationships which lead towards the functioning of the whole. The notion of an assemblage allows for relationships which are not necessarily directed towards the functioning of the whole, but which might indeed cause a network to stall or even cease functioning. In relation to this point it is important to emphasize the ways in which agency is distributed throughout the assemblage, which functions as a ‘federation’ of actants, in which all material and non-material things are participants (Bennett 2010). Indeed, Latour speaks of a ‘parliament of things’ (1993: 144–145) to describe such collectives (see further discussion in Olsen 2010).

‘Now’: archaeology, modernity and the present

I think one of the issues which we failed adequately to come to grips with in After Modernity was our treatment of modernity (and indeed ‘late modernity’), albeit with some reservation, as a historical time period which might be studied in a broadly similar way to other archaeological periods (but see Harrison and Schofield 2010: 5). In doing so, we were (at least implicitly) drawing on the treatment of modernity popularized by Marshall Berman (1982) and channelled through the writing on late modernity and postmodernity by Jameson (2005), Augé (2004), Virilio (1986) and others. All of this work is more or less haunted by the spectre of Walter Benjamin, for whom modernity comes to stand in for a particular form of lived experience; modernity becomes a distinct and totalizing temporal periodization from which flows a particular treatment of time and the concepts ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’. Modernity appears in this discussion in three linked guises – as historical time period, as condition or quality of experience and as (an incomplete) project (see also Osborne 1995). Putting aside the problems of treating modernity as a single unified project (instead of the form taken by a heterogeneous set of interests which draw on a similar underlying philosophical justification for the exercising of certain modes of power/knowledge), as Osborne (1995: 13–14) notes, the ‘time’ of modernity is not straightforward, as it involves a complex doubling in which it defines itself simultaneously as both ‘contemporary’ and ‘new’. In doing so, it constantly creates the present as ‘contemporary past’ whilst it anticipates the future as embodied within its present. This simultaneous intimacy and distance of the past in the (modern) present is what makes working on the archaeology (as τα αρχαία, ‘the ancient’; see Witmore, 2012; Harrison and Schofield 2010, 6) of the present so conceptually difficult, even oxymoronic. I am certainly not the first archaeologist to discuss the ways in which the past is actively created in the present (e.g. Shanks and Tilley 1992) or the ways in which simultaneous, overlapping pasts are contained within it (e.g. González-Ruibal 2006; Lucas 2005, 2010; Olivier 2011; Schlanger 2004; Witmore 2006b; Högberg 2007; Holtorf 2008, 2012; Witmore 2012), but nonetheless, this oxymoronic position provides a window on an issue which concerns archaeology and its relationship to the present as a historical time period more broadly.

I think one way of avoiding this bind is to work with Benjamin’s distinction between the present as a historical period and the experience of Jetztzeit or ‘now-time’ (Olivier 2011; Funari and Vieira de Carvalho 2009) which is generated as a result of a revelatory intervention in the present (see also Dawdy 2010 on the use of Benjaminian perspectives on ruin and
the relationship between modernity and antiquity in relation to archaeology). I use this term ‘intervention’ explicitly to highlight both the role of archaeology as an intervention in contemporary society, and its role in translating (or, perhaps more accurately, creatively assembling) the intervening traces of the past in the present. For Benjamin, ‘now’ represents the point at which a constellation of images, objects, agencies, ideas and trajectories coalesce to form a unique image or assemblage (Rosen 2003: 2) which in turn generates a dialectical realization of the past being gathered up in the present (Osborne 1995: 143). The assignation of a particular event to a specific moment in time becomes irrelevant as past, present and future are experienced as a single moment in an alternative historico-metaphysical experience which generates an explosive revelation and sense of redemption. Leaving aside the metaphysical elements of this notion, the idea of a ‘now-time’ as a creative coalescence of multiple overlapping pasts experienced simultaneously at a particular, unique time and place is helpful in overcoming the simultaneous intimacy and distance which is implicit in a modern notion of the ‘present’, and provides us with the grounds on which to begin to build an archaeology in and of the present for the future.

Adopting the sense of the present as Jetztzeit means that we are no longer dealing with a historical present, but a series of localized (and hence spatialized) presents, and the pasts that are generated by the relationships between the particular people and things contained within them. These collectives of human and non-human actors which coalesce as assemblages experience a sense of synchronicity of pasts in the present generated by their creative coming (or gathering) together at a particular moment in which the ordinary chronological boundaries which divide them one from another are severed. I say ‘gathering’ here as I see within this a creative role for archaeology in actively bringing things and people together (‘assembling’ and ‘reassembling’) and helping to generate this experience of Jetztzeit. Hence my suggestion that archaeology should abandon the focus on particular temporal periods for an emphasis on the present and the pasts that intervene within it at a particular moment of archaeological involvement; that is, archaeology, ‘now’. This seems consistent with various discussions of alternative historical ontologies in which the past is perceived as palimpsest and the ‘trace’ (another thoroughly Benjaminian concept; see e.g. Lucas 2010) plays a fundamentally creative, even revelatory, role.

Discussion and conclusion: from ‘the archaeology of the contemporary past’ to an archaeology in and of the present

I want to stress here that my emphasis on surfaces, surface assemblages and the process of assembling and reassembling as opposed to that of stratigraphic excavation and depth is not intended as a criticism of archaeological method, but of the way in which we represent what archaeology is and does. Clearly, excavation is an important archaeological field methodology, and even excavation can be rethought not as a process of retrieval from obscured depths, but indeed as a process of creating and exposing a series of archaeological surfaces. Similarly, the concept of assemblage plays an important role in excavation as well as surface collection, in the sorting and classification of finds, the filing of records, and the organization and reorganization of data and all the other forms of information which are produced as a result of this process. I am influenced here by the insights produced by reflective attention to the ‘craft’ of archaeology (cf. Shanks and McGuire 1996; Gero 1996; Hodder 2000; Hodder and Berggren 2003; Edgeworth this volume) and ethnographies of archaeological practice which explore archaeology and its relationship to other modern scientific field and laboratory practices (e.g. Edgeworth 2003; 2006; Yarrow 2003), drawing on the work of science studies more generally (e.g. Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987, 1993; Woolgar 1988). This distinction is fundamentally a metaphorical
one, and is not intended to restrict the sorts of field or laboratory practices which we undertake to pursue its aims. Nonetheless, the distinction has far-reaching implications for the way we conceptualize the role of archaeology and how we present it to the public.

To think of archaeology as the study of surface assemblages emphasizes it not only as a creative act in the present – a process of assembling and reassembling – but as a discipline which is concerned explicitly with the present itself. This present is not fixed or inevitable, but is still in the process of becoming; it is active and ripe with potential. An archaeology of the surface thus becomes a study of assemblages of humans and non-humans which are the product of a series of historical processes by which they are jumbled together in the present. To name these collectives ‘assemblages’ recognizes explicitly the archaeological act of classification, the application of an archaeological gaze to the surface. It also explicitly recognizes the heterogeneity of the collectives, the fact that they represent multiple, palimpsest pasts and have implicit within them multiple potential futures, and flattens not only our perception of stratigraphic depth, but also the common practice of giving priority to humans over non-humans in these collectives. To study surface assemblages in the present means to recognize the agency of humans, non-humans and the collectives themselves as charged with latent potential, as generative of new pasts and futures in the present.

I have already implied that part of what holds archaeology back from directing its attention to the present and the future is its relationship with the past, and its construction of the present as ‘contemporary past’. While archaeology as an academic discipline has been defined as the study of things which have ceased to function (see also Lucas 2004), an archaeology in and of the present should not be limited to those things which have been abandoned, ceased, closed down or been discarded, but should also be concerned with the study of contemporary objects and places which are still in operation, which are themselves still actively operating and form part of the assemblage on the surface of the world (Harrison and Schofield 2010). Thinking of the metaphor of assemblage allows us to conceptualize archaeology as a discipline concerned with surface collectives that include people and things, the living and the dead, the operative and defunct. It is not important whether these coincident humans and non-humans all belong to the same context or time, their coincidence is itself creative and generative of possible futures.

Such a move would have broader implications in forcing a reorientation of the discipline as a whole towards the application of archaeological techniques to the present and future, and a consideration of the past only where it intrudes in this present. Shannon Lee Dawdy has already argued powerfully that archaeology should turn its attention more explicitly to the future through an engagement with ‘specific social and environmental problems of the present day’ (Dawdy 2009: 140; see also Shanks and Witmore 2010). Work on the archaeology of contemporary homelessness (e.g. Zimmerman, Singleton and Welch 2010), to take one example, shows how archaeological methods might be applied to the present to help develop future social policy. The work of the Garbage Project (e.g. Rathje 2001; Rathje and Murphy 2001) is another. We would no longer think of archaeology as the pursuit of origins or of being focused on particular time periods at the expense of others, but rather as a process of working from the present and its surface assemblages longitudinally across all of the pasts and potential futures which it contains. Archaeology would abandon its focus on particular periods to work more fluidly across time and space, with a focus on the production of an intimate present and future, rather than a distant unknowable past. In doing so, we would work towards the development of an archaeology in and of the present, for the future.

In suggesting the surface as an alternative trope for archaeology arising from its reorientation to engage with an emergent present and its possible futures, I do not mean to suggest that the surface should be directly opposed to the notion of depth (see Graves-Brown this volume).
Indeed, surfaces can be deep and multi-layered. I do not intend to develop a notion of the surface as ‘superficial’ or opposed to that which is ‘inside’ something. Indeed, thinking of the present as a surface, as an interface with the ‘now-time’, is intended to deepen significantly the definition of the surface. In the same way that it is not useful to speak of the ‘surface’ in opposition to ‘depth’, I do not think it necessary to speak of the ‘inside’ in opposition to the ‘surface’. Instead, in speaking of the surface, I want to draw attention to that which is actively assembled and exposed. When a rock is broken into two, new surfaces are exposed to inspection. It seems to me that it is the creative action of producing the surfaces which is important here, rather than the fact that what was previously ‘inside’ is now ‘outside’. It is helpful to think of the past as simultaneously imminent (in the sense in which all pasts exist as a product of the present) and hidden (in the sense in which we have to do work to generate these pasts) in the present; indeed, that surface and depth as well as present and past are on the same ontological level. But I think there is an important semantic difference between this simultaneous presence and distance of the past and its traces in the present, and the idea of ‘hidden’ depths. There is a sense in which that which is deep and hidden comes to stand in for the unattainable. In contrast, the idea of ‘surfaces with depth’ is important in emphasizing the accessibility of the past, present and future. One can only ‘see’ what is on the surface, or, perhaps, in this case, what is on the surface one creates. I simply mean to speak of the surface as something which is attainable, in contrast to the idea of hidden depths which always remain just beyond our grasp.

Engagement with the surface and the ‘now’ provides a way of bringing into consciousness both that which has been actively ‘forgotten’ or ‘covered up’, and those actors and things which are the most familiar and hence the most easily overlooked. Indeed, although these appear to be opposites, they are both simultaneously distant and proximal. The uncanny and the everyday, the proximal and the distant, the past and the present (and the future) all occupy the same ontological fields and all occur simultaneously in the ‘now’. It is in the creative engagement with the surface and its assemblages, with the active process of assembling and reassembling, that archaeologists are able to intervene in the present to produce a confrontation with the past (however ‘deep’) in the present for the future. I argue that by investing in an alternative trope of archaeology-as-surface survey and the accompanying trope of the archaeological record as surface assemblage, we can expand the discipline from the study of the ruin, the derelict and the abandoned to become one which is concerned with both the ‘living’ and the ‘dead’. By reorienting our work in this way, the archaeology of the present and future will take a central place within the discipline, and allow archaeology to engage with issues of contemporary and future social, political and ecological concern.

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References

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