In this comment I argue that ethnoarchaeology is not the only means for an archaeological engagement with living traditional communities. I suggest that some practices can be better labelled ‘archaeology of the present’, due to their lack of interest in providing analogical frameworks of inspiration for archaeology. Instead, the archaeology of the present aims to better understand living societies by using archaeological methods and theories. Rather than pitting one sub-discipline against the other, however, I suggest that they are both necessary and complementary.

I feel great sympathy for the ideas defended by the contributors to this World Archaeology debate. I find their attempt at opening up ethnoarchaeology praiseworthy and share their concern with the ethical and political context of the sub-discipline. It is my impression that overall ethnoarchaeology has fallen out of sync with theoretical developments in archaeology at large. These articles go a long way to making the sub-discipline relevant to contemporary debates again. It is my impression that our disagreements come mostly from conceptual issues, rather than deep theoretical differences. Actually, my main concern is with the notion of ethnoarchaeology itself. Here I will argue two things: that, when we try to open up ethnoarchaeology, we may end up doing just archaeology and that, if we want to keep the specificity of ethnoarchaeology, then analogy has to be at its heart.

I see ethnoarchaeology as the study of living traditional societies using archaeological methods and theories with the twofold purpose of producing a less Western-centric archaeology and inspiring new ideas and interpretations of the archaeological record (González-Ruibal 2003). This or similar views are held by many practitioners (see David and Kramer 2001, 2, Arthur and Arthur 2005, 217; Lane 2006, 402; Marciniak and Yalman 2013, 1; Politis 2015, 4). What this definition implies is that the ultimate objective of ethnoarchaeological research is ‘to improve methods and procedures of archaeological inference, and particularly the use of analogical inference’ (Lane 2006, 402; also Sillar and Ramón Joffré this volume).

I am very aware (contra Lyons and Casey) that such analogical inference is not necessarily of a nomothetic kind nor does it have to be related to middle-range theory in any way. It can be simply ‘food for the archaeological imagination’, using David and Kramer’s apt phrase (2001, 195). Whether we engage in the production of middle-range theory or simply find inspiration in contemporary societies to do better archaeology, analogy remains important in the definition of ethnoarchaeology. Analogy is not exclusive to ethnoarchaeology, of course. Archaeology, like...
anthropology and history, is based on analogical reasoning: it builds knowledge through comparison. However, the gist of ethnoarchaeology is that the work of comparison is not aimed at making sense of a specific cultural context that is the object of research, but the opposite: its aim is to generalize analogy (or to stimulate analogical reasoning) out of a specific context. This can be done in different ways. The lessons extracted from human-material entanglements in a specific society can be employed to interpret similar phenomena in that same society in the past (direct historical approach), to compare with homologous phenomena in other societies with a similar sociopolitical organization or subsistence practices or living in similar environments (cautionary tales, spoiler approach, middle-range theories, behavioural laws), or to reflect on archaeological issues more generally (food for the archaeological imagination) (see Arthur and Arthur 2005).

For Lyons and Casey ethnoarchaeology offers a unique way of studying the interaction between people and things in non-Western contexts. However, it can be argued that this is what archaeology in general does (although not restricted to non-Western contexts), unless we accept that it is ethnoarchaeology which, as Lyons and Casey also write, ‘helps archaeologists think about human-material relationships outside their own experiences’; that is, if ethnoarchaeology keeps its analogical raison d’être at the wider service of archaeology.

If we do without this analogical purpose and study the interaction between people and things for its own sake, then we have simply archaeology. Thus, Skibo and Schiffer (2008, 6) argue that archaeology ‘studies relationships between people and things in all times and all places’ (emphasis added), whereas for Olsen et al. (2012) archaeology is the discipline of things, again irrespective of time. Lyons and Casey see ethnoarchaeology as a corrective to a Western-centred archaeology of Us, of the kind proposed by Harrison and Schofield (2009) – different, by the way, from the original archaeology of us, which included non-Western examples (Gould and Schiffer 1981). But I cannot see the reason for not extending the archaeology of the present to non-Western contexts. I also fail to see in what way a kind of research that has as its main goal ‘to inform archaeological concepts and improve interpretation’ (David and Kramer 2001, 2) is the best option to balance the oblivion of Others that is typical of the archaeology of Us. As if living traditional communities could not be studied archaeologically without serving an end other than improving knowledge of themselves. In fact, at least one African archaeologist has defended the need to do an archaeology of the present in Africa, not only for its epistemological relevance, but also for its applied potential, as a way of revaluing local technologies and know-how (Kienon-Kabore 2005).

Lyons and Casey make a very good point when they emphasize the necessity to counterbalance the present archaeological focus on things with people. Yet putting people back into the picture, doing socially engaged science and using ethnographic methods is not the preserve of ethnoarchaeology. In fact, it is typical of much contemporary and indigenous archaeology (e.g. Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006; Zimmerman, Singleton and Welch 2010). Ethnography has even made its way into prehistoric archaeology, as practitioners use more and more the ethnographic method for self-critique and community engagement and for adding multiple narratives, perspectives and temporal dimensions to the contexts where they work (Hamilakis 2011).

In fact, that the boundaries between ethnoarchaeology and archaeology sensu lato are blurred is clear in the articles in the present debate. Bill Sillar and Gabriel Ramón Joffré, for instance, admit that few of the studies they comment on self-identify as ‘ethnoarchaeology’. In turn, Brady and Kearney’s article is, for me, impossible to distinguish from mainstream indigenous archaeology (for example, Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2003). Indigenous perspectives and values have been taken into account for understanding rock art in Africa, Oceania and the Americas and even colonial scholars were interested in documenting indigenous experiences and uses of prehistoric art (e.g. Balfour
Paul 1956). That rock art cannot be considered ‘of the past’ or misrepresented by being declared a ‘site’ is something that indigenous archaeologies have been defending for a while – the authors, in fact, mention the work of Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson (2006), which is a good example of this perspective.

I empathize wholeheartedly with the epiphany experienced by Brady and Kearny when seeing rock art through the eyes of indigenous people. But appraising the affective, sensorial nature of landscape does not require ethnarchaeology. The contribution of phenomenological archaeology, which, inspired among other things by non-Western perspectives, has changed our understanding of art, monumentality and place, should be taken into account. Phenomenological archaeologists have been moving away from classification, patterns and other concerns of cultural-historical archaeology since the early 1990s (Tilley 1994; Hamilakis 2014), and substituting for (or complementing) these with perspectives inspired by emotion and bodily engagement. Brady and Kearny also argue that their ethnarchaeological experiences show that ‘the past does not exist but is a sequence of revelations in the present’ and in that way ethnarchaeology distinguishes itself from ‘standard archaeological practice’. This is probably true, but I would argue that their research also distances itself from ‘standard ethnarchaeological practice’. In fact, archaeology has reflected way more on temporality, the malleability of the past and the dissolution of past-present dichotomies along the lines suggested by the authors (i.e. Shanks 1992; Witmore 2006; Olivier 2008) than ethnarchaeology ever has (Lane 1994, for an exception). All this does not, of course, invalidate the work of Brady and Kearny in any way. It simply renders the label ‘ethnarchaeology’ of little heuristic use.

Something similar happens with the ethics and politics of ethnarchaeological research, which figure prominently in this debate. With Cunningham and MacEachern, I am wary of the extraordinary influence that the hard sciences, big data and analytical techniques are having in our discipline as a whole – see Kristiansen (2014) for a celebration and González-Ruibal (2014) for a critique. I am concerned too with the global inequalities and acceleration of research that this model purports. Yet I am not sure that ethnarchaeology is necessarily the epitome of a slow form of knowledge production. In fact, many practitioners still carry out fast ethnarchaeology. This is not exclusive of the followers of human behavioural ecology: in fact, there are many people who spend a few days documenting pottery-making techniques, for instance, without actually trying to understand much of the local culture. I argue that the kind of research that better fits this slower temporality of knowledge production is, again, archaeology. Archaeology has traditionally been a slow science (at least before the foundation of the Journal of Archaeological Science). The projects that changed the discipline were often multi-year endeavours, and they sometimes still are. In fact, the intimacy with things that is achieved through long and detailed work (Edgeworth 2012; Olsen et al. 2012) is one of the characteristics of the field. Archaeological projects, admittedly, have usually lacked social engagement with the local community until relatively recently. But this panorama is changing (Marshall 2002; Hamilakis 2011) and we are now more and more capable of bringing together the slow time of archaeology and its intimacy with things and the slow time of ethnography and its intimacy with people.

From the above discussion it does not follow that ethnarchaeology is not necessary. I would argue, however, that there are many productive ways of engaging with the materiality of the present and that some can be described as ethnarchaeology and others not. I surmise that these practices fall within a continuum that is determined by two variables: context and analogy. If one places the stress on analogy, then we are speaking of ethnarchaeology, if on the contrary, context is stressed, then it is archaeology that we have. Or to say it in another way, it is possible
to put the local context at the service of archaeology or archaeology at the service of the local context. Two important things have to be born in mind: first, this is a continuum, not a dichotomy. This means that one does not have to choose between contributing to archaeology at large or understanding a local context better. Second, when I use the word ‘service’, I mean it in epistemological, not ethical terms. One can have an intense and beneficial social engagement with a local community doing classic ethnoarchaeology and little engagement conducting an archaeology of the present.

I would argue that this continuum offers four main options. One of them, which I would call ‘classic ethnoarchaeology’, is to give precedence to analogy. This means that we can work with particular non-contextual archaeological problems in mind and try to illuminate them through an ethnographic context which is of secondary importance (that is, it could be replaced by a similar one: a San hunter-gatherer by a Hadza hunter-gatherer, for instance). This classic ethnoarchaeology can be conducted under different theoretical paradigms, although processualist, neo-processualist, logist or behavioural perspectives are those that better fit the approach. However, Hodder’s work can be considered classic ethnoarchaeology as well, despite being one of the main sources of inspiration for post-processual archaeology (Hodder 1982). Specifically, Hodder’s research could have been carried out in any similar context (and indeed he worked in quite a few), as advancing an archaeological agenda was definitely more important for him than gaining knowledge of the local cultures.

Another possibility is to give the same priority to context and analogy – analogy, in fact, can even play a secondary role. In this case, the analogical framework is often presented as ‘food for the archaeological imagination’, rather than as a way of solving particular archaeological problems. From this perspective the role of ethnoarchaeology is not just to better understand specific archaeological questions (such as the way garbage is managed, the meaning of decoration, or the life cycle of a pot). Instead, it strives to find how these archaeological questions can allow us to understand a specific community better. I would denominate this approach ‘postcolonial ethnoarchaeology’. I suggest that the work of the contributors to this World Archaeology debate falls between this kind of ethnoarchaeology and the archaeology of the present. I have defended a postcolonial ethnoarchaeology in earlier works (González-Ruibal 2003, 2006) and in fact, I believe that ethnoarchaeology is necessary to think ‘beyond the Eurocentric, neoliberal and often alienated systems of knowledge production’ that prevail in Western academia, which Cunningham and MacEachern denounce. It is important to bear in mind, in any case, that from the adjective ‘postcolonial’ that I assign to this kind of research it does not follow that classic ethnoarchaeology is necessarily ‘colonial’.

In the two scenarios discussed above analogy and context are of relevance, but they are given a different priority. However, we can envisage archaeological studies of traditional societies that do without either analogy or the context. In the latter case, we would have ethnoarchaeology conducted under the banner of human behavioural ecology (Bird and O’Connell 2006). From this perspective, the culture of the people, as Cunningham and MacEachern and Lyons and Casey eloquently criticize, matters little. In fact, I would suggest that the label ethnoarchaeology is inappropriate here. Those who engage in this kind of research are often not interested in archaeological inferences, in the way proposed by classic ethnoarchaeologists, or in understanding the relationship between people and things taking into account their cultural milieu, as done by postcolonial ethnoarchaeologists. I would suggest we simply use the label human behavioural ecology for this kind of study. The analysis of living communities is just one of the methods towards proving its theories (others being those of biology, genetics and palaeoanthropology).
On the other end of the spectrum, one can carry out work on the material world of living traditional communities without being concerned with producing food for the archaeological imagination. There are different disciplines that engage in this kind of research: material culture studies, the anthropology of technology and the archaeology of the present. The difference between the latter and the other two, as I see it, lies in the deployment of archaeological methods, theories and, more vaguely, sensibilities by the archaeology of the present. This makes this practice closer to ethnoarchaeology than the other disciplines, without for this reason being ethnoarchaeology, due to the lack of any analogical interest. As I mentioned, these four practices are not compartmentalized. They are part of a continuum, overlap and are often difficult to distinguish one from the other.

In conclusion, there are different ways in which archaeology can work in the present and ethnoarchaeology is just one of the options. It is the best option if one is interested mostly in improving archaeological methods and producing less culturally biased archaeological interpretations. But if one is interested in the relationship between materiality and people, one does not need anything more than archaeology, pure and simple.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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