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Chapter 1

Why Figurines?

Worldwide, the human body has provided a model for conceptualizing and categorizing the organization of natural, social, and cosmic spaces (e.g., Csordas 1990, 1994b; López Austin 1988; Mauss 1973; Robb and Harris 2013). A “key symbol” (see Ortner 1973: 1339–40) in art and religion, the human body synthesizes several dialectical relations: it is both model *of* and a model *for* reality (Geertz 1973: 91–94), and it is both physical and social—“the physical body is a microcosm of society”—with these dual meanings continually exchanged (Douglas 1973: 93, 101; see Sandstrom 2009: 263–64). Depicted in varied media—clay, paint, wood, stone; from miniatures to monoliths; from two-dimensional stick-figures to low-relief and in-the-round sculptures—the human figure and particularly the human head and face have dominated the visual arts for millennia.

EARLY FIGURINES CROSS-CULTURALLY

Anthropomorphic figurines were produced in many times and places throughout the premodern world. Of interest here is the co-occurrence, in both Eurasia and Mesoamerica, of figurines with times of dramatic cultural changes. One such period falls at the end of the Pleistocene (in Eurasia); the other, later and more widespread, comes at the time/stage of early-middle Holocene “neolithic” transformations associated with emerging cultural complexity.

As far as is currently known, human figures modeled of clay began to be made in Eurasia during the Late Upper Paleolithic era as components of a broader

realm of conceptual, figurative, and representational artistic expression in varied media (see, e.g., Borić et al. 2013; Budja 2010: 507–10; Kashina 2010; Soffer, Adovasio, and Hyland 2000; Vandiver et al. 1989; White 2008). Often dubbed “Venus” or “fertility goddess” figures and recovered from central Europe to Siberia, these objects typically depict voluptuous females with pendulous breasts, broad hips, generously rounded abdomens, and large buttocks and thighs. These Rubenesque characteristics, viewed through the male gaze as accentuating female fecundity, led to early interpretations of the figurines as fertility fetishes. They were carved of stone and ivory as well as shaped in clay and sometimes coated with red ochre. Their appearance coincides with a semiotic transformation manifest in the emergence of new signs, symbolic activities, means of communication, and self-referential art (Wildgen 2004: 113–14; see also Overmann 2013). Representations of females may constitute “a new level of collective perception . . . linked to norms valid for sexual selection,” but they may also reflect new social and economic roles for males and females associated with settlement and subsistence shifts accompanying climate changes at the end of the last glaciation (Wildgen 2004: 115, 120).

Several thousand years later, fired-clay anthropomorphic figures were widespread during major Braudelian (Braudel 1972) long-term *conjunctures* and *longue durée*: the radical transformations in lifeways associated with the early Old World Neolithic. These developments include the beginnings of food production and animal husbandry, year-round sedentary village settlements, construction of permanent domestic and public architecture, material culture elaboration, new gender roles, and the interpenetrating processes of social and economic differentiation (ranking), centralization of political power in permanent leadership positions, and loss of village autonomy. Dependent on agriculture (itself partially a response to early Holocene climate change), these “emergent properties” led to “new rules of social behavior, the appearance of new rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs, the co-ordination of labor to schedule tasks and promote exchange, the alteration of the natural and cultural landscape, the beginnings of new statuses and social relationships, and expansion into new regions . . . [and] the formation of ‘interaction spheres’ in which the identities of villagers were significantly altered, and new social and political relationships emerged” (Yoffee 2005: 204). Figurines are found virtually worldwide in association with these developments in village societies and preceding the rise of cities and civilizations—for example, in the Near East (e.g., Kuijt and Chesson 2005; Rollefson 2008), the Indus valley (Clark 2003, 2009), southern Europe (e.g., Biehl 1996; Chapman 2000: 68–79; Gimbutas 1974), and Jomon Japan (Chapman 2000: 25–26; Habu 2004: 142–52, 250–52). And also in Formative (or Preclassic) period Mesoamerica (figure 1.1).¹

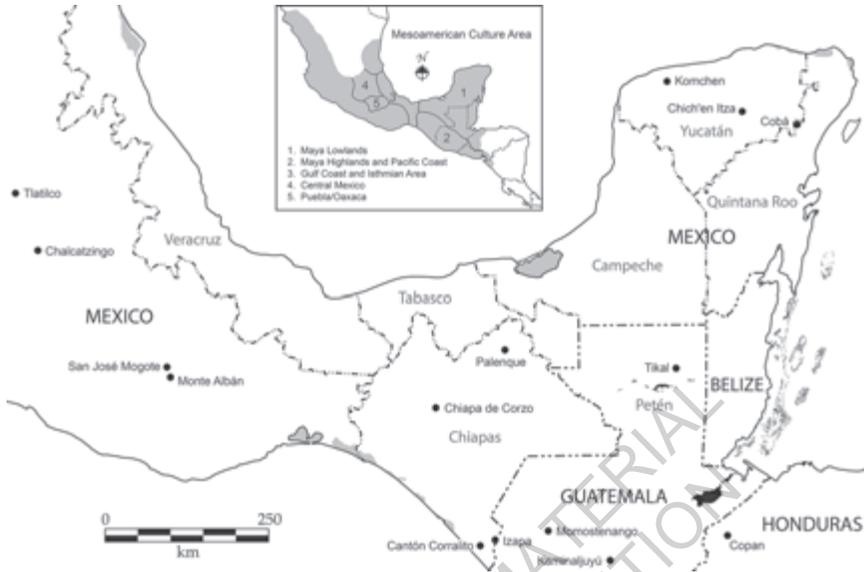


FIGURE 11. The Mesoamerican culture area, showing modern political borders and sites mentioned in the text.

In many parts of the world, the ubiquitous Neolithic-stage terracotta figurines, like those of the Upper Paleolithic, extend the general elaboration of the human body and secondary sexual characteristics, especially of females. Hands, arms, and feet are minimized and the head, if present, is often only a small projection between the shoulders, with little or no delineation of facial or other features. This is not to say that the human head was of no interest; instead, it may have been given separate and very different treatment. In the Neolithic southern Levant (Near East), for example, skulls were removed sometime after primary burial, and at Jericho adult skulls that had undergone cranial modification in childhood were covered with plaster and buried as objects of memory (Fletcher, Pearson, and Ambers 2008; Kuijt 2008; Kuijt and Chesson 2005: 175).² Some figurines may have been portrayals of specific individuals (see Bailey 1994; Biehl 1996), perhaps leaders, ancestors, shamans, or other ritual specialists, any of whom could have been of either sex. In all such early settings, these objects are thought to have played active roles in the constitution of social life, engaging in rituals and performances—the details of which are now lost—that furthered the creation of social identities, links with the past, and “meaning-making” in domestic and public spheres (e.g., Biehl 1996, 2011).

The many variations on this generalized pattern should not be ignored. In the early Bronze Age Balkans of southeastern Europe, “figurines appear with the first

settled, pottery-making farmers and they disappear abruptly with the abandonment of the Neolithic way of life” (Bailey 2005: 3). In South Asia, the earliest Neolithic (7000–5500 BC) occupation at the site of Mehrgarh (Pakistan) is characterized by farming villages in which female figurines were made even before the appearance of pottery containers, although these objects, including males, continued to be made throughout the Indus, or Harappan, civilization (Clark 2009). Jomon Japan provides another variant on the theme, with widespread and apparently primarily female clay figurines (*dogū*) of the Middle through Final Jomon periods (ca. 3000 BC–AD 0) accompanying developing social complexity and sedentism largely based on collecting storable plant foods (Habu 2004: 77–78, 142–49, 252–60). In western Mesoamerica, these artifacts are found in a culturally analogous stage or period known as the Formative (ca. 2500 BC–AD 100/200).

Why figurines, especially female, in these spatially and culturally differentiated but broadly shared Neolithic circumstances? An early interpretation, originally proposed by Sir Flinders Petrie and promoted by Marija Gimbutas (1974) but now discredited (Conkey and Tringham 1995; Marcus 2018: 6; Ucko 1962; see also Ştefan 2005–6), focused on the transformations characterized by a shift in sociopolitical roles from females to males in non-sedentary or sedentarizing societies. This involved the decline of earlier matriarchy and a mythical female goddess—connected with natural forces, earth, and fertility; a “Great Mother” or Mother Goddess—and the rise of patriarchy. The shift accompanied a rejection of female leadership and property ownership (for example), replaced by an emphasis on males in these positions of authority.

These transformations underlie a provocative thesis proffered by Leonard Shlain (1998) but explained through different mechanisms. Shlain proposes that the submergence of a “feminine principle” by the masculine occurred at the threshold between orality and literacy, coinciding with early stages in the development of alphabetic writing and literacy as mechanisms for exercising power. These latter placed an advantage on linear, left-brain thinking, leaving visual, artistic, and iconic imagery demoted. What resulted was, in essence, a conflict over “the alphabet versus the goddess” (Shlain 1998).³ Changes in communication modes and media appear to be key, as in the “semiotic transformations” in the Late Paleolithic. Figurines (especially females) gained prominence in material culture assemblages—and visual discourse—dating to these major sociopolitico-economic metamorphoses. Writing systems also often originated in such eras (Houston 2004: 239). Is this coincidental, or might there be similar causal factors underlying both?

Joyce Marcus’s studies of early anthropomorphic figurines, especially in Oaxaca (highland Mexico), have identified cross-culturally valid empirical and gender-based propositions concerning their occurrence. For example, figurines are particularly

associated with village societies and ancestor-based descent groups (Marcus 2018: 4). Ancestors could “intercede with the spirit world on behalf of their descendants” by being coaxed, with offerings and favors, to occupy a “physical venue, such as a figurine” (Marcus 2018: 4–5). Women generally carried out rituals honoring recent ancestors in domestic contexts, whereas men’s rituals focused on more remote lineage founders and were held in special structures (Marcus 2018: 5). Hand-modeled female figurines were most common in village societies, whereas mold-made and male figurines tended to be associated with cities and state-level societies (Marcus 2018: 7, 9). The end of handmade (primarily female) figurine manufacture can be associated with changes in ancestor status, as ancestors turned into the founders of royal dynasties (Marcus 1998: 21). At the same time, female figurines’ end may be related to the “rise of a dominant organized religion” (Proskouriakoff 2001: 342).

A study of the impact of modernization on an early to mid-twentieth-century Tzeltal Maya community in highland Mexico (Nash 1967) provides insights into the social tensions resulting from pervasive cultural changes in village societies and their effects on the sexes. This small, relatively isolated village experienced increasing contacts with national and regional Ladino authorities, who imposed new regulations on indigenous leadership structures. Faith in traditional curers and the guardian ancestors they represented was eroded, and political conflict erupted between the curers and external civil authorities. Simultaneously, new economic activities (cattle raising and trucking) led to new sources of wealth and its distribution and to economic conflict. These structural and organizational changes in the social environment contributed to a dramatic rise in homicides, typically fueled by alcohol and exacerbated by suspicions of witchcraft (in half the cases). Men, who regularly carried arms, machetes, and knives as part of their daily agricultural activities, killed other men; women did not kill and were not killed but goaded their spouses, sons, or other relatives to action.

Anthropomorphic figurines were not directly involved in this twentieth-century Tzeltal case. But returning to the question of “why figurines” in antiquity, it can be posited that these objects may have helped negotiate and communicate new expectations for ancestral authority and new social roles of males and females in the unsettled circumstances of emerging complexity.

INTERPRETING FIGURINES

A representation of the human figure, whether painted or formed of clay or stone, is an icon, an image based on physical similarity or likeness (as opposed to a symbol, based on convention), and is culturally coded (Sebeok 2001: 104). The key for archaeologists studying fired-clay figurines is to decipher this coding (see, e.g.,

Hamilton 1996). As Richard Lesure (2002) and others (e.g., Clark 2003; Joyce 2000) have discussed, archaeologists' interpretations of anthropomorphic figurines may be clouded by cultural biases and assumptions, particularly as they pertain to interrelated and fluid issues of biological sex, social gender, sexual expression, and related aspects of human identities.

The new anthropological respect accorded material culture—objects, things—and materiality in general has had positive consequences for studies of anthropomorphic figurines. These recent theoretical perspectives are united by rejection of strict Cartesian binaries of mind versus matter, mind versus body, natural versus supernatural, spirit versus the physical, human/person versus non-human/thing, and the like. Alfred Gell (1998: 96) refers to objects as “person-like,” as “sources of, and targets for, social agency,” especially in the context of ritual. This permits study of the “social life of things” (Appadurai 1986) and, according to Material Engagement Theory, the “cognitive life of things” (Malafouris and Renfrew 2010; see also “speculative realism” [Edgeworth 2016] and “panpsychism”). Among the Mayas, objects have agency and communicate with humans (Astor-Aguilera 2010; Vogt 1969: 371). In the context of these positions, then, figurines possess a form of “personhood”: they can be conceived as non-human but sentient beings that we might call non-corporeal actors, clay-persons, or figurine-persons.⁴

Several interrelated concepts about human bodies are particularly relevant to interpreting figurines from preliterate times. One is *embodiment*. Embodiment theory calls attention to subjective bodily practices and experience and to social and cultural differences in conceptualizing the human body (e.g., Busby 1997; Csordas 1994a; Reischer and Koo 2004; Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991). In major world religions today, especially in Western Judeo-Christian and Indo-European metaphysical traditions, the body and personhood are typically theorized in terms of a highly individualized, autonomous, and bounded corporeal entity. This individual entity possesses a separate, non-corporeal (spiritual and often considered immortal) component or essence referred to in the English-speaking world as the “self” or “soul.” In other cultures, the human body may be understood as comprising multiple distinct parts, each having its own incorporeal life energies or self/soul, separate from the physical body and lifespan.

In Yucatán, the term for the human body is *kukut* (‘epidermis, skin’), referring to that which is visible and encases the internal parts, but the physical body also possesses spatio-temporal analogies to the cosmos (Hirose López 2007–8, 2008). Various words relate to the vivifying energies, essences, or spirits occupying the body: *ik'* (breath, wind) is a “breath soul” also associated with the fragrant aroma of flowers and incense (Taube 2004a); *ch'ulel* (Cholan; Yuk. *ool*) is the life principle associated with flowers, the milpa, and blood as a vital fluid (Taube 2004a: 71–72;

also Duncan 2017). Another spiritual essence identified by Yukateko and northern Lacandon speakers is *pixan* (soul, spirit). Among the latter, *pixan* refers to the heart or soul in a person's chest, above which lies one element of *tukul*, thought or sense. *Tukul* also resides in the forehead and under the ears, and all three are interconnected (Boremanse 1998: 84). Still another essence is *kinam* ('bodily warmth, vigor, fortitude').

A related concept is *partibility*. From the perspective of alternative conceptualizations of the body, one view envisions human bodies as internally partible or dividable ("dividual"; Strathern 1988; see also Busby 1997; Chapman 2000; Duncan and Schwarz 2014; Duncan and Vail 2017; Geller 2012).⁵ Among the Mayas, different parts of the body—such as head and limbs, internal organs, solids, and fluids, especially blood (Tedlock 1992: 133–34)—may possess different life essences, spirits, or souls (Astor-Aguilera 2010; Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006: 12; Martínez González 2007; Novotny 2014).⁶ For example, the early twentieth-century Lacandons of Chiapas believed in two souls: "One dwells in the heart and is immortal; the other lives in the foot and frightens people on the trails. After dark this latter soul may take the form of a living man and cause the death of the person it meets" (Duby and Blom 1969: 293). The Tzotzils considered the human soul to reside in the tongue; it leaves through the tongue after death (Nash 1967: 461, 1970: 131). In the Andes, both the human body and the cosmos have a "soul"; the human soul is essentially a conscience with oversight of the body. Disruptions of the human soul parallel a lack of equilibrium in the cosmos, illustrating "the connection between the human body, moral transgressions, cosmic perturbations, and physical or spiritual illness and death" (Mendoza 2003: 230). Farther afield, in Laos, the Lamet recognize two concentrations of "soul" (*klpu*), one in the head and one in the knees, which rule over upper and lower parts of the body, respectively (Needham 1976: 71).

The Classic Mayas conceived the human body as a mix of solids (bones, flesh, organs), liquids (e.g., blood, semen, and other fluids), intangible substances such as breath and voice, and mental essences or capabilities including knowledge, consciousness, thought, and dreams (see Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006). Such animating essences can be widely shared, including being infixed into objects and places through ritual (Hendon 2012: 7). For the Mayas of Zinacantan, Chiapas, objects themselves have souls: "Virtually everything that is important and valuable to Zinacantecos possesses a soul: domesticated plants . . . houses and household fires . . . musical instruments used in their ceremonies. . . . the most important interaction going on in the universe is not between persons nor between persons and material objects, but rather between souls inside these persons and material objects" (Vogt 1969: 371).

Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic anthropomorphic figurines illustrate these concepts in that they are typically recovered as fragments, and thus *fragmentation* as a behavioral practice is often associated with these objects. That is, figurines (and other artifacts) may have been intentionally broken in an act of ritual termination. For example, Paleolithic female clay figurines (and other objects) from Dolní Věstonice (Czech Republic) might have been deliberately shattered by thermal shocking during firing (Vandiver et al. 1989). John Chapman (2000: 68–69) noted that at southeastern European Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites with more than 100 figurines, fewer than 10 percent of them were complete. He proposed that figurines were “manufactured in ways which enable fragmentation to occur simply and without difficulties,” suggesting an expectation that they “will be broken during their use-life, not at its end” (Chapman 2000: 25).

The concepts of fragmentation and partibility are conjoined with respect to the “mosaic corporality” of human bodies through the intentional perimortem or postmortem separation of bodily parts and their subsequent curation or spatio-temporal deposition (Duncan and Schwarz 2014; Geller 2014: 16–17). Fragmenting or “dismembering” and “decapitating” anthropomorphic figurines, like dismembering humans, releases the powerful essences of the different parts of the body of the person or entity represented by the image. This allows the essences to permeate and animate the wider area in which the fragments are deposited. Such practice can be considered “reverential” termination or veneration and might be assumed to underlie the deposition of the Middle Preclassic figurines discussed here. The converse, desecratory termination or violation, might be indicated by smashing the fragile figurines or by the shattering of the Dolní Věstonice figures during firing. Such breakage might be a reaction, for example, to dissatisfaction with the response of the entity (deity? ancestor?) represented by the figurine to human petitions for assistance. Distinguishing either type of termination with respect to fragments in non-primary deposits, however, is complicated by normal taphonomic processes.

Enchainment (Chapman 2000: 5, also 26, 226; see also Talalay 1987: 166) refers to the development of a “chain of personal relations through exchange” of goods. Enchainment is a corollary of fragmentation, not only entailing intentional breakage of objects but also giving or exchanging the fragments to create enduring social bonds. Enchainment through such “token presentations” can signal dyadic transactional relationships communicating mutual rights and obligations (Blehr 1974).

The enchainment concept proceeds from Marcel Mauss’s (1973) principle that gifts are inseparable (or inalienable) from the persons who bestow them. It is also related to Annette Weiner’s (1985, 1992; see Chapman 2000: 31–32) discussion of *inalienability* and “keeping-while-giving”: the identity of the owner of an object stays with it even after it changes hands. Inalienable objects may circulate through

certain kinds of exchange networks but are not market items or commodities. They are repositories of knowledge; they are featured in ceremonies of commemoration and authentication of individual and collective identities; they figure in the establishment of hierarchy; and their production requires special knowledge and is often gendered (see Mills 2004: 240). According to Weiner (1992), inalienable possessions carry cosmological authenticity and thus unique power and value; their material invocations of historical memory are vital for cultural reproduction and provide stability in times of change. Thus inalienable possessions might be considered “heritable goods that link generations” through a shared identity (Clark and Colman 2014: 19, also 31n21).

Enchainment provides several avenues for assigning meaning to the abundant figurine fragments recovered outside of primary contexts, their previous uses mute. That is, the final depositional context of a figurine fragment is itself meaningful, as, for example, the post-ritual discard of broken Jomon figurines. Some fragments were enchainment by being taken to other villages; others were “dispersed around the village, where discard in different places brought renewed life to the earth”; and still others ended up in refuse deposits (Chapman 2000: 26). Importantly, enchainment through fragmentation is also a means of relating the living to the ancestors through the deposition of not only objects—for example, figurines representing ancestors—but also human bones in special contexts (Chapman 2000: 75, 145; see also Novotny 2014). Such contexts might include the construction of new buildings, the powerful essences or life forces of the reverentially terminated, venerated ancestors imbued into that new place from the fragments of figurines or bones. Both can enchain kin groups with particular locations (DeLance 2016: 22).

Still another perspective on interpreting figurines concerns the impact of *miniaturization*. Three-dimensional miniaturization, whether of humans, animals, or places, creates objects conducive to intimate scrutiny (Bailey 2005: 38). In particular, psychological experiments (using electroencephalograms) have shown that miniaturization changes the way the brain experiences time and space: it compresses time and permits the creation of and entry into separate, alternative worlds of space (Bailey 2005: 28–37). Consequently, individuals and groups that handled figurines in public or private rituals, placing them in tableaux or other compositions and relating stories about them, may have been engaging “in practices that effectively changed their experience of space and time” (Joyce 2009: 411). If Maya actors performed these activities while under the influence of psychotropic substances, the experiences could have been intense.

As applied to anthropomorphic clay figurines, fragmentation and enchainment reveal the extraordinary degree to which these miniatures are not only partible but

also *permeable* (they and their parts have penetrable boundaries and interact with their environment) and *relational*, defined by relations with other people, things, and spaces (Chapman 2000: 4–8, 27–28; Joyce 2005: 142). Importantly, within the non-Cartesian, relational worldview of the Mayas, all these interpretive concepts can be united through an emphasis on social contexts: personhood does not equate with merely being a live, biological human or even a “nonhuman, visible or invisible, and animate or inanimate . . . Being a person has to do with *social relations as the community bestows and acknowledges it*” (Astor-Aguilera 2010: 230, emphasis added). The Middle Preclassic lowland Maya anthropomorphic “clay persons” discussed here had life histories and performative roles and agency; they interacted with humans in rituals and commemorations; and they passed through different social stations, perhaps with attendant rites of passage. These latter might have included patterned human behaviors in concert with figurine manufacture or in preparations and maintenance attendant to their usage in rituals, likely centered on group histories, cyclical continuities in the natural world (seasonality; celestial movements and phenomena), and perhaps maize agricultural practices. Figurine fragments encapsulated life energies that could be shared with others and that, when embedded in human-constructed places, imbued them with those powerful constituents.

Chapman’s (2000, 2008; also Chapman and Gaydarska 2007) ideas about intentional breakage of figurines and other categories of artifacts, and the dispersal and deposition of the fragments through enchainment, have been widely applied in European archaeology but less so in Mesoamerica (cf. Clark and Colman 2014; DeLance 2016: 13–23; Rice and Cecil 2019). At the same time, these concepts have been criticized on several reasonable grounds, most saliently concerning whether the final location of the fragments within a site is a statistically meaningful behavioral indicator of enchainment or simply an outcome of primarily random processes (see Brittain and Harris 2010; but it must be remembered that not all pottery bowls and jars originally in use at a given site can be completely reconstructed from recovered fragments). Substantial ethnoarchaeological research on artifact use-lives and site-formation processes has been devoted to understanding the behaviors underlying patterns of breakage and discard (e.g., Schiffer 1972, 1987).

In sum, these concepts and practices—personhood, partibility, fragmentation, enchainment, inalienability, miniaturization, permeability, relationality—were literally embodied in material representations of living creatures, such as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines. These objects were “social beings” in their own right (see Fogelin and Schiffer 2015). Like humans, their bodies and body parts also possessed vitalizing forces or essences.

NOTES

1. The term *Formative* is used throughout Mesoamerica but *Preclassic* is favored in the Maya area, and I maintain this distinction.

2. In Postclassic Yucatán the Itzas followed a somewhat similar practice with the decapitated skulls of Kokom lords, and a skull with painted plaster over the face was recovered from the cenote at Chich'en Itza (Landa in Tozzer 1941: 131, also note 613).

3. Shlain, a vascular surgeon by profession, suggested (but did not claim to prove) that these are general trends taking place at different points in human history. He connected them to the (controversial) binary of left-brain (timekeeping, alphabetic literacy; male) and right-brain (creativity, artistry; female) processes, which are beyond the immediate concerns here. Neuroscience studies explain the differences as “motor skill[s] suited to the manipulation of three dimensional relationships of the world apprehended by vision and grasped through touch” (Iaccino 2014: 15). (For more on cerebral asymmetries and brain lateralization, see, e.g., Iaccino 2014. For absence of gender differences, see, e.g., Nielsen et al. 2013.)

4. Somewhat similarly, Andean peoples conceive of the dead (including past humans, plants, animals, and even wooden tools) as continuing to contain a “life force” and participating in the decisions of the living (Arnold and Hastorf 2008).

5. Alternatively, human bodies can be considered “fractals”: integral and differentiated on a scalar basis rather than partible (Wagner 1991). For example, bodies may be viewed as nested accumulations of ancestors (Fowler 2008: 48–49). (On the powerful essences of ancestors, see Novotny 2014.)

6. Among the Nahuas (Aztecs), different forces resided in the head (*tonalli*), heart (*yołotl*), and liver (*ihiyotl*). A possible non-human analogy to this unfamiliar view is the octopus: researchers report that octopus arms often act like separate creatures with separate personalities and tasks (Montgomery 2015: 160–61).