

Reflections on a Counter-Humanist Archaeology: A Commentary on Greer 2023

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In 'Humanist Missteps', Matthew Greer makes the pointed observation that non-anthropocentric frameworks, including symmetrical, object-oriented and posthuman feminist archaeologies, have primarily focused on deconstructing the human–non-human binary while failing to problematize humanist assumptions about who counts as Human. At the core of Greer's argument is the matter of citational practice: which social theorists are archaeologists referencing in their efforts to craft relational approaches to humans, things, animals and plants? In answering this question, the author points to a notable lack of Black Studies theorists, particularly the work of Sylvia Wynter, Zakkiyah Jackson and Tiffany King, in posthumanist archaeologies. While I agree with Greer's critiques, his essay stops short of explaining this citational silence. In this brief commentary, I suggest that this absence of Black Studies scholarship reflects the fact that the discipline of archaeology remains a 'white public space' (Brodtkin *et al.* 2011: 545) and maintains an artificial division between analysis and activism.

On the problem of whiteness

While there has been a notable growth in the number of archaeologists drawing on the theoretical work of Black and Indigenous intellectuals, these critical, relational and inter-sectional approaches have not been incorporated by posthumanist scholars (nor by archaeology more broadly, for that matter). Instead, non-anthropocentric approaches in archaeology have primarily been shaped by the work of Euro-Western scholars like Giles Deleuze, Bruno Latour and Rosi Braidotti. Reflecting on the ontological turn, Métis sociologist Zoe Todd has argued that academic structures (rather than individual scholars) make 'it easy for those within the Euro-Western academy to advance and consume arguments that parallel discourses in Indigenous contexts without explicitly nodding to them' (Todd 2016, 8). The problematic structures to

which Todd refers are comprised of practices and discourses that maintain forms of 'communication imperialism'—the systemic collection, processing and dissemination of information about Black and Indigenous peoples by settler institutions—which marginalize Black Studies voices (Osterhammel 2005, 64).

As Mathew Reilly (2022, 55–6) points out, the predominance of Euro-Western knowledge systems has determined the public presentation of history, erased the labour of Black and Indigenous peoples within the field and shaped the differential treatment of non-white bodies and beliefs. The tendency of non-anthropocentric archaeologies (a) to gloss over the foundational role of colonialism when critiquing human–non-human hierarchies, and (b) to ignore the racialized, gendered and classed nature of the Human as an analytical category, reflect the discipline's embeddedness in whiteness—a social, political and economic system which naturalizes and privileges Euro-Western culture, beliefs and customs. Without acknowledging and addressing whiteness in archaeology, Greer's call to cite Black Studies scholars in culturally and historically sensitive ways will only serve as an intellectual band-aid to broader structural imbalances within the discipline.

On the issue of politics

The observed citational absence of Black Studies scholarship by non-anthropocentric archaeologists reflects the distinct politics of post- and counter-humanist perspectives. Black Studies is a radical intellectual project which uses intersectional forms of analysis to reveal, critique and replace dominant forms of knowledge production. The work of Black feminist scholars like Sylvia Wynter, whom Greer cites extensively, is in dialogue with the anti-colonial movements of the 1960s and the writings of African thinkers like Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire (Erasmus 2020). Whereas 'post' humanism is a progressive position that moves the humanist tradition

in new directions, the 'counter' humanist politics of Black Studies intellectuals is a revolutionary position that replaces humanist values and teleology. Greer demonstrates these positional politics when outlining how posthumanist feminist archaeology acknowledges humanism's links with colonialism, slavery and racial capitalism, but fails to explicitly engage with racial realism—an understanding of race as a historically situated social construct with material implications for daily life (Bell 1992).

In addition to the centrality of race to counter-humanist critiques, Black Studies is an engaged praxis. Counter-humanism works to understand the past to alter contemporary structures of whiteness, whereas non-anthropocentric approaches have been oriented around re-envisioning these relations in the past. As Ayana Flewellen (2021) and their colleagues have argued, applying Black feminist theories to archaeology requires a dismantling of the activist–scholar divide; a repositioning which prompts archaeologists to work at the grassroots level to challenge forms of communication imperialism in contemporary society. Citing the work of Black Studies intellectuals in our efforts to reform interpretive frameworks, without also embracing the anti-colonial, anti-racist and liberatory politics at its core, undermines the power of the counter-humanist critique. In this sense, I read Greer's essay not so much as a polemical statement against posthumanist archaeologies, but rather as a provocation for all archaeologists to carefully consider the politics of our work and how we may be reinforcing exclusionary structures of whiteness.

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Comments

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Matthew Greer offers us a powerful, refreshing and thought-provoking critique of posthumanist approaches in archaeology as he sees them through the lens of Black Studies. He asks us to leave aside—temporarily—concerns with anthropocentrism to concentrate instead on the human side of the equation, while nonetheless positioning himself in line with posthumanist efforts to dismantle the human–non-human divide. The crux of Greer's arguments

is that posthumanist approaches do not go far enough in distancing themselves from humanism for two reasons. First, humanity remains (tacitly) equated with white, heterosexual, economically well-off men, a single group that forms the scale against which all other people are measured. Second, post-humanist approaches do not acknowledge that racism and related forms of oppression were integral to the emergence of humanism and not a by-product of it.