Ethics, Not Objects

Ruth M. Van Dyke

Posthumanist or new materialist tools, positions and conversations contain some useful ideas for archaeologists to think with, but others that I find deeply problematic. In this opinion piece, I organize my thoughts around three posthumanist 'turns' to objects and materials, relations and assemblages, and non-human animacy. I appreciate how some strands of Posthumanism can help us think more creatively and thoughtfully about relations between humans and non-humans, but I argue against non-anthropocentrism, flat ontology and symmetrical archaeology. Animacy and perspectivism can help remedy colonialist and late-stage capitalist destructive forces, but archaeologists should take care not simply to appropriate, patronize, or re-colonize non-western thinkers. Ultimately, I argue, we should not need continental philosophy to remind us to care about one other, all living creatures and the well-being of our shared planet. What is needed today are ethics, not convoluted turns toward objects.

Introduction

The posthumanist turn is everywhere in archaeology these days. As this movement (and its close relatives the ontological turn, the new materialism, vibrant materialism, speculative realism, actor-network theory and object-oriented ontology, to name a few) has built steam over the past decade or so, I find myself increasingly frustrated and bewildered by what some of my archaeological colleagues are doing. Why do I continue to find posthumanist arguments so troubling, when better minds than mine seem to be wholeheartedly on board? What is useful here, and what is problematic?

These concepts are sets of tools, and like any tools, they are not in and of themselves good or bad. What matters is what we do with them. The ontological turn contains a vast array of positions and conversations that cross-cut philosophy, sociology, STS, anthropology, archaeology, environmental activism, literature and even theoretical physics. When we refer in shorthand to the 'ontological turn' or 'the new materialism', we might mean to invoke actor-network theory, or the OOO, or Deleuzean assemblages. Although there are some commonalities, these are very different beasts. We need to disentangle this philosophical entanglement. Some of these ideas are useful to think with, some are deeply problematic, and none are going to help us address contemporary climatological and social crises without the purposeful and collective involvement of humans. In my estimation:

1. Creative insights into human relationships with objects can be useful. The call for our work to be non-anthropocentric or object-oriented is not.
2. Assemblages/hybrids/networks involving a multitude of relationships among human and non-human entities are good to think with. A 'flat ontology' or symmetrical archaeology is not.
3. Animacy and perspectivism may help Western scholars get closer to understanding non-western ways of being in the world, and they may help challenge the destructive effects on people and the planet wrought by late-stage capitalism. However, we need to be very careful that we are not simply appropriating, patronizing, or re-colonizing our non-western colleagues and interlocutors.

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4. We should not need continental philosophy to argue that it is important to care about each other, all living creatures and the well-being of our shared planet.

The material turn

As philosophers and sociologists have become interested in things, archaeologists quite understandably have leapt at the chance to contribute something meaningful to the conversation (e.g., Hodder 2012, 2016; Olsen 2007; 2010; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Webmoor & Witmore 2008; Witmore 2007). After all, we study materials! Who knows more about material–human relations than archaeologists? And archaeologists are intrigued and excited to have a theoretically legitimate way to talk about the affective, intuitive, aesthetic, emotional aspects of our engagements with the non-human world. Processual archaeology leached all the joy out of our engagements with objects, rendering them into sterile bits of scientific evidence. Post-processual archaeology did little better, keeping things at arm's length, transforming them into symbols. Archaeologists treated objects as no more than vehicles for our studies of social relations (although this was certainly not the case for political economists and Marxist scholars—see McGuire, this volume). But it seemed that something was missing.

Phenomenology crept in to legitimate sensory encounters with the material, as Ingold's work (e.g. 2000) inspired us to revel in the withdrawn stoniness of stones, or the leathery texture of a burnished clay pot. Graham Harman's (2011) quadruple objects not only interact with humans—they also have dimensions unto themselves that humans cannot reach, and lives that need never involve people. Walter Benjamin and Henri Bergson inspire us to think about the decaying ruins of modernity, persistently resisting our attempts to erase them (Olivier 2011). Bjørnar Olsen (2010) and Þora Péttursdóttir (Olsen & Péttursdóttir 2014) have found a romantic beauty in quasi-abandoned Icelandic herring factories and flotsam-covered beaches. They use photography and archaeological methods to lay bare the artificial divide between archaeologically acceptable, temporally distant pasts and the detritus of industrialization.

I enjoy a nicely composed black-and-white photograph of industrial ruins as much as the next archaeologist, but Olsen and Péttursdóttir's work does not go far enough. As they turn their gaze upon objects, people disappear. That is part of their point, of course, showing how persistent materials continue to have lives outside human interaction and intervention. But the ruins of Modernity are bound up in social, political and economic changes that usually have profound effects on the people involved in making, using, abandoning, salvaging, or ignoring them.

Shannon Dawdy (2016), Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal (e.g. 2008; 2019), and Lori Khatchadourian (2019) are doing a much better job of thinking about ruination while keeping a firm focus on the people involved. Benjamin's (1999) ruination was meant as a critique of Modernity, illustrating how capitalist materialism contains its own seeds of destruction. Following Benjamin, Dawdy illustrates how ruination in historic and contemporary New Orleans is explicitly linked to late-stage capitalism. Gonzalez-Ruibal's archaeology of 'super-modernity' (the period since the Second World War) involves investigating battlefields, internment camps and industrial sites to reveal suffering that political forces have sought to hide. Khatchadourian examines the detritus of factories left behind by the collapse of the Soviet state in Armenia. While Khatchadourian's work evinces fascination with post-industrial ruins, her focus remains on people and how they have been affected by (or how they are using) the collapsing industrial infrastructure:

> For those who live amidst decay, ruination is not an object of contemplation on the perversions of modernity … It is a struggle among human and nonhuman forces working variously in cooperation and conflict … To speak of 'life in ruins', then, is to call up both the loss of what was once stable, the unexpected declines in fortune, indeed the broken promises of modernity from which much contemporary archaeology draws breath; and also, the vitality of ruination, the livelihoods that ruins sustain as people assist, resist, and cope with decay. (Khatchadourian 2019, 1–2)

Here, there are no detached observers of romanticized ruins—rather, people are amongst the debris, salvaging, dismantling, trying to reverse, exploit or ignore the decay. We see how ruins are woven into economics and identities. Retaining this ultimate focus on the humans in the picture is, I believe, critically important.

I am deeply disturbed by calls for archaeology to become less or non-anthropocentric (e.g. Knappett & Malafouris 2008). I take a similarly dim view of the use of the term 'Posthumanism', as if humans have ceased to matter. Colleagues have explained to me how their use of these terms is meant as a way of toppling post-Enlightenment Western Man from his [*sic*] pedestal. It's not about removing humans from the story, they say—it's

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about allowing non-humans, including animals and the environment, to have their due. But I am an anthropologist—not a geologist or a paleontologist—because I am interested in people. Another way to look at this is that a turn towards non-humans is a turn *away* from people, and it is happening at a time when millions of people critically need help and attention. We might think reflexively about who benefits—and who does not—from shifting the focus to the non-human, from arguing that humans should not be central to our work.

Sev Fowles (2016) points out that the turn to things comes at a moment when archaeologists are troubled by our relationships with our human subjects. Post-colonial archaeology recognized the ways we have appropriated the bodies, objects, lives and voices of the peoples we purport to study. We began to make an effort to 'empower' our marginalized subjects, to listen to and collaborate with descendant communities. But to our discomfort and dismay, post-colonial subjects used their voices to point out angrily the pain, suffering and damage that archaeologists have facilitated and inflicted on their communities! It turns out that collaborating with descendant communities is very, very difficult. Not coincidentally, it was around this time that archaeologists became enamoured of the ontological turn. Let's talk about objects again! Enough with these people! Objects are the perfect subjects, Fowles points out, because they cannot talk back.

In my view, then, the material turn can be useful where it sparks creative insights into human relationships with the world, but we need to be mindful to keep the people in the conversation. The exhortation for our work to become non-anthropocentric or object-oriented is not helpful.

Relations, networks, assemblages

Another important aspect of these 'turns' is an emphasis on relationality and interconnectedness. Assemblages, meshworks, entanglements and bundles all move us away from discrete categories and into more emergent, contingent, relational spaces. Marxist archaeologists (see McGuire, this volume) will point out that relationality is nothing new, but the emphases here tend to be less on dialectical tensions and more on a simple charting of multiscalar relations among humans and non-humans.

Bruno Latour's actor-network theory inspired the Stanford-based development of a movement its proponents call 'symmetrical archaeology' (e.g. Olsen 2007; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Olsen & Witmore 2015; Webmoor 2007; Witmore 2007). The idea here, following Latour (1993; 1999; 2005), is that we should not give greater importance or causal primacy to any entity in a relational network—rather, we should simply chart all the reciprocal interconnections. The argument is for a 'flat ontology' which incorporates living beings, objects and relationships, thereby allowing us to look at the world with fresh, non-anthropocentric eyes. Latour exhorts us to work from a flat perspective so that we can trace all the connections, including material ones, without assuming a hierarchical power structure (and thereby potentially getting it wrong). I think one reason a flat ontology is attractive to archaeologists is because it seems to provide a way out of our circular arguments about intentionality and causality; rather, in 'symmetrical archaeology', intentions do not matter, and changes are far too complex to be attributable to any one cause.

The problems with a flat ontology and with 'symmetrical archaeology', however, are obvious to many of us (see, for example, Barrett 2014; Hodder 2014; Sørensen 2013; Pollock *et al.* 2014). If things are equivalent to people, then people are equivalent to things … but things lack intentions, and central nervous systems. Things do not suffer, but people do (Pollock 2016). If we are only interested in charting relationships among entities, and we consider people no more important than any other entities in the network, then we have no logical means by which we can hold perpetrators of violence and suffering to be accountable for their actions (Bernbeck 2018, 365). If our ontology is 'flat', what happens to inequalities and power relationships (Bauer 2018; Fernández-Götz *et al.* 2020; Van Dyke 2015)?

We can revisit Latour's (1999, 176–7) own famous gun example to see how thinking with networks can be useful, but considering objects and people as equivalent is not. Proponents of a flat ontology say it is neither the shooter, nor the gun that is responsible for a murder, but rather the hybrid of the two. It is certainly useful to think about how culpability is complex and may well extend beyond the human shooter. We might consider how the gun found its way into the hands of the shooter, and what larger social and economic events may have helped motivate the shooter to murder. We may ascribe some responsibility to the people who made it possible for the shooter to acquire the gun. However, we still need to hold the human shooter accountable! And it is absurd to hold the gun itself as equally responsible (for a similar argument using the contemporary example of the coronavirus, see Khatchadourian 2020).

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Rather than flat Latourian networks, or muddy 'entanglements' (Hodder 2012), I prefer Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) more sophisticated trope of the assemblage—a multiscalar, flexible, emergent set of contingent relations encompassing the material, the social and the semiotic. Deleuzean assemblages help us to think about contingencies and connections, but without the problematic calls for 'symmetry' or equivalence among people and things. Assemblages feel less static than networks, as they are continually emergent. Rhizomes, or plateaus, in Deleuzean imagery, are 'flat' in the sense of being non-hierarchical, but Deleuze does not ask us to ignore power relations—by contrast, his work critiques the relationships between capitalism and desire in the late twentieth century. Some colleagues have constructively deployed assemblages to think about scale, shifting social and technological complexities and change through time (e.g. Alt & Pauketat 2019; Crellin 2020; Harris 2017).

Again, these are all merely conceptual tools, and what is most important is what we do with them. One colleague tells me that for him, posthuman means extra-human, to go beyond the human. It is possible to use a relational approach to expose how human perpetrators of suffering are present, but concealed, within a vast web of material things and relations. Jason De Leon (2017) does a masterful job of this as he documents the human cost of the Prevention Through Deterrence policy on the US/Mexican border. De Leon uses Michel Callon and John Law's (1995) concept of the *hybrid collectif* to describe how immigration enforcement incorporates not only ICE agents and a border wall, but desert terrain and animals. Prevention Through Deterrence forces undocumented border crossers away from populated areas into remote, harsh desert regions where they suffer and die of exposure, injuries, exhaustion and dehydration; their bodies are then often scattered or consumed by animals. The desert not only kills migrants, but frequently erases the evidence, deflecting responsibility away from the American politicians who created the policy. De Leon's hybrid collectif may be 'extra-human' (my words), but De Leon's work never loses sight of its central focus—raising awareness about the tremendous human suffering on the US/Mexico border and the culpability of the US government in migrant deaths.

Animism and perspectivism

To what extent is it useful to think about non-humans as animate, inseparable from and intertwined with human lives? Martin Holbraad and Morten Peterson (2017) contend it is important for anthropologists to grasp that non-western subjects do not simply have different ways of apprehending one world (relativism), but actually inhabit worlds that are different from ours in fundamental ways (see also Alberti *et al.* 2011,). Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (2012) perspectivism, developed in Amazonian South America, seems to get Euroamerican scholars closer to understanding non-western, premodern 'worlds otherwise'. Benjamin Alberti (e.g. 2014) builds on Viveiros de Castro to see Argentinian body-pots as attempts to bring stability to unstable, animate matter. As Holbraad and Pederson (2017) point out, thinking with other kinds of ontologies may help anthropologists to innovative insights they might otherwise not have had (see also Alberti 2016).

As an archaeologist working with Native American descendant communities in North America, I know to listen with respect when Indigenous peoples tell me particular materials or places are animate, alive, and require particular kinds of care and attention. Collaboration with Indigenous peoples only works when Westerners take seriously (rather than patronize) Native perspectives. Viveiros de Castro's work is ultimately directed towards according rights and respect for Indigenous Amazonians. Nieves Zedeño's (2008) discussion of animate Blackfoot bundles stemmed from her engagement with Blackfoot tribal elders as she helped repatriate bundles held in museum collections.

It is quite another thing, however, for non-Natives to appropriate Native ontologies as their own. When western philosophers argue for vibrant, animate matter and a relational world, some Indigenous colleagues see yet another colonial seizure. Métis and feminist scholar Zoe Todd (2016) delivers a blistering indictment of the ways Latour has at best failed to acknowledge, at worst appropriated, the ideas of Indigenous philosophers who have always worked from an ontology where the earth and all its elements (animals, plants, wind, sky, water, people) are animate and inter-connected. Todd points out that there are Indigenous philosophers whom archaeologists could read, converse with and consult, but they generally have not been included in the ontological turn.

Saving the planet

Particularly in recent centuries, humans have not been particularly kind or considerate to the non-human entities on this planet. Cartesian binaries led us to separate humans from 'nature', and to think

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of the non-human world as 'resources' at our disposal. By contrast, Jane Bennett (2010) and environmentalists urge us to think of the earth—all its materials, all its entities—as animate and interconnected. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari and from Spinoza, Bennett (2010) wants us to consider the material world as vibrant (as opposed to passive and silent).

Latour is clearly concerned with the future of the planet, and he is now lecturing about the Anthropocene. I agree that we humans need to realize everything is connected and take responsibility for the callous disregard we have shown to the air, water and other living creatures on this planet. But this seems a weird inversion to Latourian logic that I do not quite grasp. If humans are causing climate change (and I believe we are), how does this fit with Latour's flat, non-anthropocentric ontology? The Anthropocene concept draws attention to the destructive role of humans in changing the climate of our planet on a global scale. But does not the concept of the Anthropocene reify the very purification of society and nature that Latour rejects (Bauer & Bhan 2018)? Is it Posthumanism that is giving us the ethical imperative to alleviate the suffering of those who will be impacted by increasing drought, flooding and starvation on a warming planet?

Ethics, not objects

While working on this essay, I opened my newspaper to read about the deaths of 39 Vietnamese migrants in the back of a refrigerated truck in England. I then opened my email to an announcement on the CHAT listserve of a conference at the University of Amsterdam on 'Why Things Matter!'. So it's things that matter? Really? We are living in an era of increasing global inequities, planetary warming, rising xenophobias and racisms. Corporate greed and late-stage capitalism rule the day. What we need right now is not a turn away from humans towards things. What we need is ethics.

The 2003 power blackout in the northeast US (Bennett 2010) indeed involved a host of non-human materials doing things, but the blackouts did not just 'happen' because the grid is so complicated and interconnected with circumstances and materials. We need to expose the forces—corporate greed, systemic inequalities, late stage capitalism, aggrandizers and bullies—that add to suffering, in the interest of changing things for the better.

The symmetrical archaeologists say what they want to emerge from their focus on things is an ethics of 'care' for all entities, including people (Olsen *et al.* 2012, 196–209; Webmoor 2012; Witmore 2014). But did we need symmetrical archaeology to get to this point? Perhaps posthuman is meant to signify post-humanist, in that secular humanism has failed us as a guiding philosophy. Post-Enlightenment intellectuals turned away from Church and God long ago, but has this left us adrift and unmoored in our boats of reason, arguing over philosophy while the planet is literally burning? Is Posthumanism the twenty-first-century attempt to philosophize our way back to some kind of morality?

The Posthumanism conversation seems a very convoluted way to get to what all of us should already know: treat the world, the planet, the people, the animals, the stones, the plants, with respect and care. Treat them as you would like to be treated. Christ and Muhammad said it. The Buddha said it. Kant said it. And my Zuni colleagues said it in the course of our work to raise consciousness about the destruction of the Chacoan landscape by the forces of industrialism: 'The only way that we will all survive is to have respect not only for the land but for each other.'—Octavius Seowtewa, Zuni Cultural Resources Advisory Team (Seowtewa *et al.* 2021)

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