Posthuman Potentials: Considering Collaborative Indigenous Archaeology

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This essay argues for the diversity and promise of posthuman approaches in archaeology by dispelling blanket critiques, by differentiating between distinct lines of post-anthropocentric thought and by pointing to parallels between Posthumanism and collaborative Indigenous archaeologies. It begins by arguing that symmetrical archaeology is but one part of the diverse body of thought labelled 'posthuman'. Next, it explores broader posthuman engagements with political issues relevant for collaborative Indigenous archaeologies, particularly concerns regarding under-represented groups in the field. Finally, it identifies flat ontologies as key components of posthuman approaches, clarifying what this term means for different lines of post-anthropocentric thought and briefly considering how the concept of flatness compares with Indigenous metaphysics.

Introduction

The term 'Posthumanism' elicits a breadth of responses in our discipline ranging from celebratory to pure disgust. Without proper context, this term triggers distress signals for some of our colleagues, especially anthropological archaeologists. *But I study humans!*, they say, clearly not ready to move on to whatever the 'post' in Posthumanism denotes. Indeed, some feel that Posthumanism requires that we stop studying humanity. Perhaps more troubling than this prospect is the possibility of leaving ethics, human politics and praxis behind in order to care only for non-human things.

This essay addresses these blanket critiques,[1] arguing that archaeology must attend to broader definitions of Posthumanism, particularly when considering how it fits with collaborative Indigenous archaeologies [hereafter CIA]. I first argue that symmetrical archaeology is but one part of the diverse body of thought labelled 'posthuman' and that other options, such as posthuman feminisms and assemblage theory, offer toolkits that are much more compatible with CIA. Next, I explore the implications of posthuman challenges to Eurocentrism, drawing parallels between them and CIA's centring of historically marginalized groups. Finally, I identify flat ontologies as key components of posthuman approaches, clarifying what this term means for different lines of post-anthropocentric thought and briefly considering how the concept of flatness compares with Indigenous metaphysics and, by extension, CIA. By dispelling blanket critiques, by differentiating between distinct lines of post-anthropocentric thought and by pointing to parallels between Posthumanism and CIA, I argue for the promise of Posthumanism archaeologies.

Expanding the scope

Critics often equate symmetrical archaeology (Olsen 2003; 2010; 2012; Olsen & Witmore 2015; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Webmoor 2007; Webmoor & Witmore 2008; Witmore 2007; cf. Harris & Cipolla 2017) with Posthumanism. Initially, symmetrical archaeology drew much of its inspiration from Latour's (1993; 2005) actor-network theory (ANT), arguing, for instance, that social archaeologies operated on false, modernist divides between people and world, thoughts and things, and nature and culture

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(Webmoor & Witmore 2008). As an alternative, they argued that archaeology must focus on the complicated human–non-human hybrids that proliferate the world and our understandings of the human past. A pair of glasses. A string at an archaeological site. A roadway. What do these humble things *do* in relation to other actants, and what new possibilities emerge through these connections? Symmetrical archaeologists argued that the recursive and dialectical structures of practice theory or materiality operated on distinctly *asymmetrical* grounds that generally focused on human agency and ideas while overlooking or downplaying the importance of non-human things. Moreover, symmetrical thinkers presented radical challenges to archaeology by rejecting the so-called 'imperatives' of history (Olsen 2012; see also Olsen & Witmore 2015)—that is, the archaeological tendency to frame non-human things only as representative of human pasts.

Instead of directly following symmetrical archaeology, this essay builds upon philosopher Francesca Ferrando's (2019) recent tripartite definition of Posthumanism as a critique of the following tenets of humanist thought:

1. the assumed primacy of only certain kinds of human—usually western, white, male, etc.;
2. the assumed primacy of humanity in general, including human intentionality and agency; and
3. dualistic ways of seeing and being in the world (see also recently Braidotti 2018; Crellin 2020; Crellin *et al.* 2021).

Symmetrical thinkers certainly turned our collective attention to some of the issues targeted by Ferrando, including the latter two parts of her definition, but everything has not been discovered (or readily cited)! Beyond symmetry, there lies a host of other posthuman archaeologies. Assemblage theory (Cobb & Croucher 2014; Conneller 2011; Crellin 2017; Harris 2018; Jervis 2019; Lucas 2012) and posthuman feminisms (Barad 2007; Braidotti 2018; Crellin 2020; Morgan 2019) are two important examples, both of which remain committed to *human pasts* and to *human politics* in their own ways.

Pluralizing practices

Ferrando's first point of critique necessitates a decentring of certain vantages (e.g. Euro-colonial perspectives) and an opening-up to other forms of situated knowledge, particularly that of historically marginalized groups (cf. Haraway 1988; Tallbear 2014). This part of Posthumanism clearly parallels the long-established goals of CIA, many of which are designed to increase the breadth of practitioners and, through this new breadth, influence archaeology's future. For instance, a primary goal of the Mohegan Archaeological Field School (Cipolla & Quinn 2016) is to train the next generation of archaeologists, including Indigenous (specifically Mohegan) archaeologists so that they can remake the discipline in ways that are better attuned to their own sensibilities, interests and needs. This involves much more than teaching standard archaeological methods to Indigenous students; it means exposing students to the differences in outlook, privilege and interest that exist between collaborators and to think critically about archaeology's colonial past and present. Questions remain as to how precisely settler colonial archaeologists (such as the author) engage with the differences (cf. Alberti & Marshall 2009) that they encounter in collaborative projects—especially when related to non-western histories and perspectives. I consider this challenge further in the next section, where I discuss the importance of flattening our approaches.

Flattening ontologies

Of all the concepts associated with posthuman approaches in archaeology, the notion of a 'flat ontology' is perhaps the most polarizing and misunderstood. In order to address some of the confusion and conflict surrounding this concept, I trace flat ontology's genealogy, outlining key points of contention between different lines of thought and highlighting two distinct versions of this approach—static *versus* dynamic. I argue that the latter parallels aspects of Indigenous metaphysics (e.g. Deloria [1979]2012), qualifying it as a useful approach in collaborative settings and as a potential solution to the concerns of perspectivist-inspired arguments about archaeological translations of radical difference or alterity (e.g. Alberti & Marshall 2009).

The term flat ontology originated in the work of philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar ([1975]2008). In contrast to many recent archaeological discussions, Bhaskar used flat ontology in the negative, as part of his critical realist approach to the philosophy of science. He used the term to critique approaches that focused largely on epistemology and language. For Bhaskar, such approaches represented a flat ontology because they assumed that reality was fully accessible through human–world relations and that no deeper reality or forms of causality existed: 'In this way the world, which ought to be viewed as a multi-dimensional structure independent of man [*sic*], came to be squashed into a flat surface

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whose characteristics, such as being constituted by atomistic facts, were determined by the needs of a particular concept of knowledge' (Bhaskar [1975] 2008, 45). Instead, Bhaskar sought an approach that recognized a deeper 'reality unknown, but at least in part knowable'. He called this a 'depth ontology'.

Ironically, the broader goals of Bhaskar's work do not necessarily conflict with the goals of Posthumanism, particularly the second and third parts of Ferrando's definition above. The main distinction lies in competing conceptions of flatness and its purpose. For Bhaskar, flat ontologies were harmful in that *they conflated epistemology with ontology and stopped there*; I discuss this and related uses of the term as *static* models. In contrast, all archaeological uses of the concept that I am aware of seem to employ it to challenge the defaults and taken-for-granted aspects of Western epistemologies—namely dualistic modes of thought—in order to better assess ontology; I discuss these uses of the term as *dynamic* models.

For archaeologist Sandra Wallace (2011), Bhaskar offered important critiques of Western philosophy that help to expose contradictions in certain posthuman-leaning archaeologies. As already discussed, Bhaskar pointed out the so-called 'epistemic fallacy' (Wallace 2011, 52), which equates human experience of the world with ontology: 'The implications of a critique of the epistemic fallacy are that an ontologically real world exists apart from our knowledge of it, and that humans have the ability to ascertain the nature of the world (fallible as our knowledge may be) *through the interpretation of observed tendencies* that indicate a deeper stratified reality' (Wallace 2011, 53, my emphasis). Following Bhaskar, the epistemic fallacy insists that reality is limited to human-observable things and phenomena (Wallace 2011, 54–5). This point interconnects with his critique of the 'anthropic fallacy' (Wallace 2011, 57–8) or, to use a term more familiar to archaeologists, 'anthropocentrism'. Anthropocentric approaches assume that humans are at the centre of the world or that the world is most important in the ways in which it relates to—and is experienced by—humans.

Using Bhaskar's framework, Wallace argued specifically against symmetrical archaeology's flat ontology and insistence on the proliferation of human–non-human hybrids (citing only Webmoor 2007). She argued that the 'corollary of this position is anti-essentialism, and by extension anti-realism' (Wallace 2011, 96). This is because, according to Wallace, 'Ontology becomes meaningless' with everything viewed as 'an undecipherable mish-mash contrary to Bhaskar's notion of depth ontology, which comprises scalar relations, causal mechanisms, natural kinds and other real causal entities' (2011, 96). Following this, with no differences recognized between entities, Wallace (2011, 97) saw the flat ontology as leaving us with little to say about reality. In short, Wallace framed archaeological uses of this approach as static, and thus as denying ontological difference. Citing both Bhaskar and Wallace, John Barrett (2014; 2016; cf. 2017) recently offered a similar critique. He noted that biology conforms to the laws of physics, but physics and chemistry cannot explain biology (Barrett 2016, 1683–4). Echoing Wallace, he advocated for a so-called 'depth ontology' in place of the flat ontology employed in contemporary archaeology. For him, this entails recognizing the differences between living and non-living matter, perhaps codifying them as natural kinds, and presumably beginning all analysis with this dualism in mind.

Similarly, posthuman feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti (2018, 12–13; see also Bignall & Braidotti 2019, 14) presented a related critique aimed specifically at Latour's ANT (e.g. 2005). According to her, ANT's symmetrical approach avoids recognizing difference between actors and objects (cf. Latour 2005, 76), ultimately preventing scholars from investigating power relations. Like Wallace and Barrett, each of whom concerned themselves with the flat ontology's supposed obliteration of ontological difference (see Barrett 2016, 1684), Braidotti sees ANT as advancing similar, if not identical, breeds of obliteration. Each of these critiques frames flat ontologies as static. In hopes of establishing the breadth of various approaches often labelled 'posthuman', I explore these claims in terms of assemblage theory, Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) and ANT, respectively. These theories parallel one another in their respective interests in ontology and in challenging Western, anthropocentric defaults. Similarly, each theory offers a more dynamic interpretation of flatness than portrayed by the critics discussed above. Although these theories appropriate Bhaskar's terminology, they reject aspects of his definition in their own ways. This is extraordinarily confusing because, even though they interpret flat ontology differently from Bhaskar, two of these approaches (assemblage and OOO) align partially with his commitment to realism.

The person most often associated with the term flat ontology is philosopher Manuel DeLanda (2002), whose work focuses on Deleuzian assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Unlike Bhaskar's realist approach, DeLanda's assemblage theory is anti-

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essentialist and rejects the notion of natural kinds (DeLanda 2016, 128; DeLanda & Harman 2017). Contrary to Wallace's claims above, this stance against essentialism does not preclude considerations of ontological difference or depth. According to DeLanda (2006), essence and natural kinds reduce the messiness of the world in terms of overarching and timeless types, defined by trait lists. DeLanda rejects static types in favour of process and emergence—a key concern of assemblage theory. He treats each assemblage as an 'individual singularity' ('haecceities' in the language of Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Assemblages are dynamic and have particular histories, meaning that we must ask about how each change in an assemblage relates to what came before. Following this logic, we must study how assemblages emerge, persist, and dissipate.

This focus necessitates a flat ontology, first and foremost, to help resist anthropocentrism and dualistic modes of thought. Similarly, it helps researchers avoid projecting the nature (or essence) of different entities and their relations on to their research subjects. In other words, this iteration of the flat ontology *is* an argument for ascertaining the nature of the world through observations (*sensu* Wallace 2011, 53, see above). In contrast to Bhaskar's use of the term, DeLanda's flat ontology is clearly *dynamic*. Although he begins with a flat ontology, he does not end there (e.g. Hodder & Lucas 2017). In concert with Bhaskar, DeLanda seeks to recognize ontological difference (Crellin & Harris, this volume), but not by projecting 'depth' onto the world via immutable essences. Returning to Barrett's critique above, DeLanda is not opposed to recognizing how life differs from non-life from situation to situation; but his approach seeks to avoid reifying assumptions about these distinctions or to assume that this distinction is transcendental and represents the most radical and important form of difference for each and every archaeological context. As Crellin and Harris discuss (this volume), assemblage theory frames difference as productive, *as a form of becoming*. According to them, this means that archaeologists should approach difference, not as a static ground on which to erect monolithic archaeological types, but rather as histories to be traced, with specific beginnings and ends. This applies to any and all forms of difference, including those between human groups.

Compared with assemblage theory, OOO (e.g. Bryant 2010; Harman 2009; 2016; 2018) sits slightly closer to the work of Bhaskar. This is because OOO upholds the notion of essence. Unlike Bhaskar, however, Graham Harman, the key thinker behind OOO, uses a specific notion of essence that only pertains to what DeLanda refers to as singularities (DeLanda & Harman 2017, 50–53). For example, Harman would not claim that stone has a general essence (i.e. stone at all places and times), but would insist that a specific stone does have an essence that allows it to maintain its identity through time. Like assemblage theory, OOO adheres to a flat ontology. For example, Bryant (2010, 246) asserted that a flat ontology, 'refuses to privilege the subject-object, human-world relation as … different in kind from other relations between objects'. Furthermore, OOO argues that objects are not exhausted by their relations. They always hold something in reserve. For thinkers like Harman, this reserve or essence is what allows objects to maintain their identities as they weave in and out of relations with the world.

These *dynamic* approaches parallel the Indigenous metaphysics outlined decades ago by Vine Deloria, Jr ([1979]2012; cf. Todd 2016). He noted a broad-brush difference between Western and Indigenous understandings of experience *versus* knowledge. According to him, an Indigenous metaphysics 'confronts the reality of … experience' without explaining away aspects that do not make immediate sense (Deloria [1979]2012, 5). This is because 'experience is not limited by mental considerations and assumptions regarding the universe'. In contrast, for Western science (which we can equate with Bhaskar's critical realism), 'the teachings of a lifetime come thundering down' making reality into what 'you allow your mind to accept, not what you experience' or observe. Perspectivist-inspired thinkers like Alberti and Marshall (2009) raise similar concerns about archaeologists' tendencies to explain away instances of radical difference or alterity based on meta-ontologies that tell them how the world works in all times and places. A dynamic flat ontology allows the researcher to approach the world with an open mind, to let differences sit without explaining them away and to permit experience and observation to shape knowledge actively rather than being stamped out by superimposed natural kinds (essences) or universalized theories of how the world works. This model complements CIA methods (e.g. Cipolla *et al.* 2019, 132) that combine the realms of knowledge and experience in an open-minded way.

Like assemblage theory, OOO and aspects of Indigenous metaphysics, Latour's ANT also advances a flat ontology, but one that varies from these other approaches. Like these other theories, ANT uses flatness as a starting-point from which to

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challenge Western common sense. For instance, Latour (2005, 76) noted, 'ANT is not, I repeat is not, the establishment of some absurd "symmetry between humans and nonhumans". To be symmetrical, for us, simply means *not* to impose a priori some spurious *asymmetry* among intentional action and a material world of causal relations.'

In contrast to the other theories reviewed, ANT does *not* delve far beyond human experience and surface observation. For Latour, the source of all change must be found in the *actual*—what we can observe at any particular moment (Harman 2009, 127–30), rather than in what objects or actants hold back as potentials. Braidotti's critique referenced above likely stems directly from this characteristic of ANT. Latour insisted that a network of actants is wholly specific to a time and a place (Harman 2009, 16–25). Once a new actant joins the network, a new network is born and its connection to the previous network is tenuous. This is because Latour sought to avoid enduring substances or essences in favour of relations. As Harman (2009) notes, for Latour, the same dog does not exist for multiple days or years; like everything else, it is just part of a series of transforming networks. Anything else, according to Latour, would move back toward essentialism. An actant like the dog in this example is 'no more than what it modifies, transforms, perturbs, or creates' (Harman 2009, 127), that is, the dog is all of its relations at a single point in time and little more. If a flea jumps on or if you change the dog's collar, the network is new—nothing lies beneath those particular observable relations. Without historical depth, this falls much closer to the static flat ontologies critiqued by Bhaskar, Wallace and Barrett. This also stands in contradiction to my experience conducing CIA, where the *history* of relations is incredibly important (see Cipolla *et al.* 2019, 134).

Conclusion

The three facets of Posthumanism highlighted by Ferrando have the potential to actualize new forms of archaeology that productively intermesh with both Indigenous metaphysics and CIA. One way to do this, while addressing the concerns of perspectivist-inspired calls to take Indigenous alterity 'seriously' (Alberti & Marshall 2009, 344) is through a dynamic flat ontology. This essay presented a brief genealogy of this concept and showed, contrary to many critiques, that several archaeological uses of flatness, such as assemblage theory and OOO, are dynamic and open to recognizing ontological difference.

As an archaeologist who conducts collaborative research with Indigenous communities and nations in North America, I see several advantages to the Posthumanism defined by thinkers like Ferrando. First, these iterations of Posthumanism show that there is more than a single version of humanity against which all other forms compare (Crellin & Harris, this volume). Second, they offer new ways of thinking about the world (including the past) by exposing and challenging our defaults. This, of course, involves rethinking the importance of non-human entities and flows in human history. Third, they provide a set of ideas that are compatible with many Indigenous worldviews (Cipolla *et al.* 2019). I see this compatibility as encouraging further collaboration and discussion with Indigenous colleagues, collaborators and knowledge keepers—helping to expand and diversify the community for which archaeology is useful.

Note

1. Its critics often seem to conflate Posthumanism with Ahumanism, a separate but related line of critique developed by the philosopher Patricia MacCormack (2020). This line of critique advocates for human extinction, glossing over the distinctions between different human groups and histories and paying little attention to human inequality and suffering.

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