

Commentary: Difference and Posthumanism in Archaeology

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The papers presented in this issue of the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* (ARC) represent a stimulating set of encounters with posthumanism, and demonstrate the increasing breadth of topics that archaeologists are thinking about with these new theoretical ideas. Here we see everything from ethnographic encounters with people and stones, via ash mounds in India, becoming-with animals in the Mesolithic, and circumpolar crafting practices to Egyptian gods being thought about in new and interesting ways. This speaks both to the range of posthumanisms that are available to us as archaeologists, and to how these forms of thinking offer us new tools with which to engage with our materials. In the short space I have for my commentary here I cannot possibly do justice to the different papers, and it would do them a deep disservice simply to try and summarize them. Instead, therefore, what I want to do is to draw out a single theme that I think is critical both to posthumanism—especially the elements of it that I find most appealing—and the papers in this issue. That theme is *difference*.

In their introduction our editors do an excellent job of introducing posthumanism, and so I will not rehash that history here. Instead,

let me focus on this issue of difference, a word that crops up only a handful of times in their opening remarks. For many posthumanists, especially those influenced by Rosi Braidotti (e.g. 2011, 2013, 2019) and her readings and reinterpretation of Gilles Deleuze (e.g. 2004) and Baruch Spinoza (1996; c.f. Deleuze 1988, 1990), difference is *the* critical issue. It fundamentally underlies the approach these thinkers take to the world. In our standard understandings of difference, the term refers to the presence or absence of similarity, to the ways in which two things differ when they are compared. This is a fundamentally negative form of difference, in which it is subordinated to a broader notion of bounded identity (Deleuze 2004). In contrast, for Braidotti (2010: 22) as for Deleuze (2004: 63–64), it is essential that we develop a positive or affirmative notion of difference. Here the term connotes the processes of differentiation that produce reality—the ways in which intensive differences form flows of force which shape the possibilities of the world around you. This is difference as process, difference as energy, *difference-in-itself*. Difference here is not secondary, it is the primary driving element of the world. This is critical because it shifts our attention away from ideal types, or ‘kinds thinking’ as Anna Tsing (2015) would call it, towards analyses that focus on process, and how different things emerge through these processes. The move away from ideal types, of course, immediately undermines the notion of the ahistorical or transcendent human, and demands we focus on how people only come to exist within immanent relational assemblages. Thus, the ideal subject of humanism is revealed to be the ethnocentric imposition of a very particular kind of person, and one in need of radical rethinking. This is posthumanism.

How does this issue of difference raise its head in the papers contained in this volume of the ARC? For Alicia Núñez-García, there is a concern that certain forms of posthumanism, most notably second-wave symmetrical archaeology (cf. Harris and Cipolla 2017), risk leaving human beings as undifferentiated throughout time and space. The absence of difference is key for Núñez-García. For the Object Orientated Ontology that underlies second wave symmetrical archaeology, objects have essences because they are always in part

withdrawn from their relations (e.g. Harman 2011). This means that objects can be thought about in the absence of humans. For other forms of posthumanism, where relations take centre stage, this is not the case. Here relations are not secondary to things themselves, but rather emerge in parallel with them. This is a process of difference making in which humans and things coalesce together. From this perspective there can be no discussion of how things are different without also articulating how people, landscapes and materials are different too. The question we are forced to pose as posthumanists, then, when thinking through the kinds of crafting practices Núñez-García details, is what can a body, whether human or otherwise, do? This question is empirical, historical and post-anthropocentric. It is the fundamental question that Spinoza, Deleuze and Braidotti ask, and it underlies all posthumanist thought.

The question of what a body can do brings us to another critical form of difference that K. Paddayya raises in his paper on the ash mounds of the Deccan, that between the virtual and the actual (Deleuze 2004; Harris 2017, 2018, 2019; Lucas 2012). For Deleuze (2004: 260), the virtual is the potential present in any set of relations, the fully real but not yet actualized elements—the potential for the empty cup in your hand to be filled with water, for the empty seat next to you on the plane to be sat in. One cannot understand the actual without including the virtual—you cannot understand what a cup is unless you think about it being filled, or the approach of a stranger towards an empty airline seat without the mixture of hope and fear that the thought of having a whole row of seats to yourself on a transatlantic flight brings. Furthermore, the virtual becomes actual through a process of difference making (Deleuze 2004: 258), through the way difference emerges in the world—the difference made by someone sitting in a seat, or by the filling of your cup. Paddayya uses the virtual and the actual to think about how new relations between humans, cows and dung differentiate new capacities for these materials, how humans can draw on the vibrancy of dung to produce ash, and with that ash to actualize and differentiate new potentials for cleansing spaces from germs or building new mounds. Humans, animals and

materials are here each differentiated through these processes, and with them specific historical worlds come into being as new forms of material bodies emerge—bodies which can do new things.

Humans and animals are also involved together in making difference in Tove Hjørungdal's article on the Early Mesolithic of southern Scandinavia. In this fascinating paper, Hjørungdal not only explores how humans and animals became with one another (following Haraway's (2008) term) in this period, but also how they differentiated each other and the landscape around them. Beavers and humans form a perfect pair here, building and dwelling across landscapes, opening up new spaces with which they each interact in distinct ways. The world itself emerges through the complexity of relations between beavers, humans, woods and water. The making of lodges differentiates a space for beavers to use, but also one that humans can employ by supplying materials for them to work with and places for them to stay. The lodges are places that make the world different through creating virtual capacities that humans and beavers can each actualize differently. Difference itself moves and shifts here, it is nomadic, as Braidotti (2011) would put it. This complex interplay of landscape, people (of potentially different kinds) and animals that Hjørungdal begins to map builds on a recent and much welcome turn to relations in Mesolithic archaeology (e.g. Conneller 2004; Overton and Hamilakis 2013).

Yet the kinds of Deleuzian difference that Braidotti employs, and that I have outlined here, are not the only form of difference that archaeologists and anthropologists are in the process of developing. In his paper, Uroš Matić examines how our understandings of Ancient Egypt change when we begin to take the claims made about the divinity of Pharaohs seriously, i.e. when we do not presume that pharaohs are *like* gods, but actually *are* gods. A clear difference emerges here between how such claims are normally evaluated—that it must be symbolic, metaphorical or representational—and what happens when we take them at face value (Holbraad 2007). Matić thus advocates for *ontological* difference, that is not just a generic difference, but one that requires us to question our own ontological categories (e.g.

the division between the human and the divine) in order to begin to translate Egyptian concepts. In the previous examples we have seen how posthumanism reaches towards *difference as ontology*, here we see an emphasis on *ontological difference* (Alberti 2016). The two approaches share some things in common (as Viveiros de Castro's (2010) acknowledged debt to Deleuze makes clear), but they also differ in important ways (Harris and Crellin 2018; Alberti 2016). Nonetheless, the centrality of difference to posthumanism remains paramount.

In Hilary Morgan Leathem's excellent paper we see both versions of difference coming together. On the one hand we have the ruins of Mitla, which can speak to and possess people—a classic example of ontological difference. On the other, Leathem traces why and how this form of difference has emerged now—why it is that the ruins have become differentiated in a new way, and how new capacities for action (the ability to possess someone) have come into being. In effect, how have new virtual potentials emerged? In turn, she convincingly situates this case within a broader discussion of the ways in which colonialism, post-colonialism and state power can never be separated from such emerging assemblages—it is the increasing control of the ruins by Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History that severs one set of relations, whilst also creating new ones. The end of one process of becoming means the differentiation of another. Leathem's insightful paper thus offers a route to bring together these two forms of difference, tracing how one emerges and allows for the other. The close relationship I detect here between a new materialist form of difference and an ontological one means I take a different view than Leathem on the potential for new materialism in archaeology. For me, at least, there is no part of new materialism that aims to 'embrace things before all else' as she puts it—rather the aim of new materialism, and posthumanism more generally, would deny that things can possibly emerge prior to human beings, or, indeed, vice versa. The decentring of the human called for by posthumanism is not then aimed at silencing human voices, but instead is intended to create the space for different voices, both human and non-human, to

emerge outwith the straitjacket demanded by our traditional modes of thought.

Archaeology is still in the early stages of its interaction with posthuman concepts. From the various forms of Object Orientated Ontology, and the broader school of speculative realism, via new materialism, assemblage theory, the affective turn, multispecies ethnography, ahumanism, transhumanism, the ontological turn and more, there are a multiplicity of avenues for us to explore. Not all of these will prove productive for archaeology. Some will allow us to say new and interesting things about the past, some will provide new modes of critique, others still will open up new subjects of enquiry and new questions that lead in directions we cannot currently foresee. In their interaction with archaeology they will all need to be altered, adjusted, remade and transformed. This is as it should be—concepts need to constantly shift to both stay alive and remain useful. The papers in this edition of the ARC further our understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of some of these different perspectives, and suggest ways in which both the original concepts and archaeology itself might be transformed through their encounter.

Why should archaeology engage with posthumanism? I suggest that our need to adopt a posthuman position in archaeology is driven both by the philosophical power of its arguments, the potential it entails for changing how we write about the past, and the ethical implications it has for the present. In contrast to claims that posthumanism might dull the ethical or political critiques we develop, I suggest instead that it enhances them. First, it makes space for a much broader definition of the human than that with which we have traditionally worked. Second, it emphasizes the importance of political ecology, and critically that there is no longer any point in drawing a boundary between politics and ecology (cf. Carter and Harris forthcoming). Our emphasis to date on the human alone has had devastating consequences for the world we live in through its bifurcations of nature and culture, world and people. By creating posthuman pasts, we can help to rethink a posthuman present, and through that to

imagine and form the posthuman future. And that, I suggest, is the only hope for any kind of future for our species at all.

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