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Commentary

Kathleen Sterling 

Greer offers an excellent primer on some Black Studies scholars' critiques of humanism, for which he uses the label 'counter-humanism' after Erasmus (2020), distinguishing these approaches from 'post-humanism.' He identifies two primary strains of posthumanism relevant to archaeological interpretation, symmetrical archaeology and posthuman feminism, though examples of the latter are drawn from a broader body of academic literature and are subject to less critique. Posthumanists are shown to prioritize dismantling a human–object divide, while counter-humanists critique the human–non-human split. This may appear to be more or less the same project, but the framing of 'A/not-A' rather than 'A–B' emphasizes the hegemonic relationships between these categories, the continuity within, and makes more explicit the fact that people are included in both the non-human and object categories.

In this argument, a key distinction between counter-humanism and posthumanism lies in the relevance, history and role of race in defining who or what is properly human. As described here, post-humanists see the role of race as developing somewhat independently of European colonialism, whereas counter-humanists see that role as deeply entangled in and necessary to the ways in which colonial projects were undertaken. This is not a minor point of disagreement, even if the two approaches may agree on some points in this history. Some posthumanists, particularly feminists, recognize that not all categories of identity have been treated as equally human, and these categories can be conceived of intersectionally even if race is not always one of those categories. Counter-humanism assumes that people can and have de-humanized entire groups, not just categories within, as other

and less-than, and this is a precursor to and justification for colonialism. The alternative, humanism emerging from colonialism, implies that colonial powers came to their racism through reasonable, if incorrect, assumptions resulting from interactions with colonial subjects that subsequently became part of the justification of colonialism. The second major critique Greer advances is related to this, the tendency to consider humans as a mostly homogenous, timeless category. This category is typically exemplified by the 'unmarked' categories of identity: the white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, heterosexual, economically successful, adult male.

Greer does not attempt to infer the motives behind why these scholars have not engaged with Black Studies. The motives are an important part of the critique, however, as they are linked to the outcomes from this lack of engagement. Why are post-humanist theorists, and by extension posthumanist archaeologists, ignoring a rich body of social theory coming from many of the same disciplines they otherwise look to? Part of the explanation may be the belief that Black Studies is not relevant to the contexts these archaeologists work in. Most, if not all, of the archaeologists Greer cites are white and do not study African or African diaspora contexts, and may therefore assume this literature has nothing to offer to their work. In post-Pleistocene contexts only one kind of *Homo sapiens* persists, allowing assumptions of racial homogeneity to easily go unquestioned. This kind of thinking naturalizes our current ways of dividing people into races, and extends these categories into the past. In brief, the subtext is that there is some racial essence that living people *know* that would have been known in the same way by past peoples. The insights from Black Studies do

not have to be limited to African and African diaspora topics, or race and conceptions of Blackness, but researchers might need to start with that literature to open the doors. Black scholarship has not always been considered legitimate knowledge. The knowledge producers and their subjects of inquiry are still seen as being as too particular rather than universal; Black Studies is seen as partisan and more parochial than the analysis undertaken by our white counterparts. Since it would be unseemly in the twenty-first century to openly question the *quality* of Black scholarship, the most acceptable way to dismiss it is on the basis of *relevance*.

Turning to situating the construction of race within the last few centuries, we must ask ourselves why some posthumanists seem so invested in the idea that race becomes a category of defining human others only after the start of colonialism. The depth of the cruelty of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and attempted Indigenous genocide seems inexplicable without a racial framework that allowed colonizers to see their victims as less human or even inhuman. Perhaps this historical timing reflects a sense that race is something that non-white people have that becomes relevant when (white) people have frequent interactions in life or the imagination with racial others. This position is a centring of a construction of whiteness that ignores the historical particularity of ‘white’ as a racial category (see Painter 2010 for a deep dive into this history). In the end, I must conclude that systemic racism is a key factor in the lack of awareness, interest, or engagement with Black Studies.

Greer’s examples of post-humanist archaeologies focus on two categories that he frames as ends of a spectrum with symmetrical archaeologies as existing the longest and being least interested in people, and posthuman feminist archaeologies as the most recent and most interested in people. He describes his critiques as being of the missteps, but also argues for some examples that these missteps result in humanist interpretations, which seems more extreme than a mere misstep. A repeated example of this on the symmetrical end of the scale is the assumption that past people within a given context are equally human. Interestingly, Greer cites these authors’ desire to ‘undo humanism’s transformation of things into “abject” others, “faceless minions”, “servants” and subalterns’. These specific words all describe roles that those deemed less fully human *people* play. Other examples seem sometimes to conflate agency, intentionality and power in framing objects as equal to humans. These are theoretical discussions rather than archaeological case

studies, but Greer also includes a contemporary archaeology case study. Pétursdóttir’s writings about an abandoned herring-processing plant frame her experiences there as the only possible experiences, since the material world she moved through had its own real existence or even identity, independent of her, or anyone else’s, presence there. While the herring plant does indeed exist whether or not any people come to describe it or the affect it engenders in them, such an interpretation ignores the roles of positionality and relationality. Phenomenology of race (e.g. Fanon 1986) or more specifically of whiteness (e.g. Ahmed 2007) sheds light on this problem. Black and other racialized people who live in white spaces are always aware of their positionality and that of others, as well as the role of relationality. Part of the *habitus* of whiteness in a white world is to take for granted that one is typical, normal, or representative. This sense varies when other identities intersect with race, and relationality becomes more visible. Occupying one or more marked categories is accompanied by the awareness that you cannot control how other people view you, that whatever feels inherent to you being you may not be perceived by those with whom you interact. There are many instances of the archaeologist as timeless human, including some phenomenological approaches.

Greer’s critique of posthuman feminist archaeologies focuses on how, and to what extent, these approaches account for the relationship between the oppressed and the fully human in the formation of the latter. For most of the case studies in this section, the critique is primarily that the studies could take their interpretations a bit further, particularly by addressing or going into more depth in their discussions of the human others in the contexts they interpret. They are closer to what Greer argues counter-humanism can bring to archaeological interpretation, and therefore a counter-humanist stance would extend, rather than fundamentally change these studies, unlike the symmetrical approaches critiqued earlier.

I will close by arguing that another important potential application of counter-humanist approaches is thinking about our (modern) relationships to past peoples. We construct past peoples as less fully human than we are, and this is part of how we construct our present identities. The deeper in time we go, the more we see people as subject to non-human agents, rather than as humanist masters of nature or posthumanist mutually constitutive beings. The results are too often studies that focus almost exclusively on artifacts and sites that look rather like humanism without any people. What do we currently gain from this perspective, and what insights might

we gain from reconsidering our ontological relationships with our archaeological subjects? Our narratives about the past can only be improved by dismantling this human/less-human divide across time.

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On Striving as Readers: A Response to Greer

Christopher Witmore

The capacity of northern European gentlemen scholars educated in the love of wisdom, human dignity, friendship and rationality to treat their fellow human beings with irreconcilable prejudice and hold to ghastly beliefs of racial superiority, which legitimated violence, exploitation and extermination elsewhere, is one of the great tragedies of humanism. That the images of the human cultivated in texts were at variance with the lived experience of those who were treated *as other than human* was rarely noted in the books they read. I appreciate Matthew Greer's efforts to bring these concerns to the fore. I am grateful for the opportunity to read Sylvia Wynter, among others, and to think about their work in counter-humanism. I stand with Greer who reminds us that, as archaeologists, we must do more than critique ideologies, fight for inclusion, and engage in dialogue as demanded by a radical pluralism (Shanks & Tilley 1992, 246). Equity, social justice, openness, and decolonization demand the sustained effort of us all, both in our capacity as archaeologists and as readers of texts.

By rendering humans as rational animals, modernist humanism, as argued by Bruno Latour (1993), did not do sufficient justice to the human, because the *cogito*, the thinking subject, was defined in opposition to the *extensa*, non-human objects. The point, of course, was that this word 'human' was not a self-evident category, it just happened to be, in the words of Bayo Akomolafe (2020), 'simmering with

tensions, elisions, disputations and troubling departures' other than its exclusion of non-human things. Defining what it was to be human, 'Man1'—eventually naturalized into 'Man2'—relied taxonomically on the invention, and omission, of those considered to be other than human, that is, Black and Indigenous peoples taken by prejudicial humanists to lack wisdom, dignity, rationality, etc. (Wynter 2006, 125; Wynter & McKittrick 2015). This modern humanism, as Greer argues, was 'created specifically so white, economically privileged, cis-gendered, heterosexual men could colonize, enslave and extract wealth without being affected by the *Homo sapiens*, animals, plants and things they colonized, enslaved and extracted wealth from.'

Greer does us a major service in drawing our attention to the linkages between posthumanism and counter-humanism. By failing to notice humanism's emergence 'in and through colonialism and slavery', and not questioning the default '*monohumanist* conception of the human' (Wynter & McKittrick 2015), posthumanism, according to Greer, 'unintentionally reproduces harmful elements of humanism'. Here, Greer's critique, that symmetric approaches have failed to recognize that 'by adhering to a rather idealized European, masculine image, [humanism] did not "render sufficient justice" to the human' (Witmore 2021, 484 n.4), is overstated. Indeed, for Latour the 'human' was impossible to define and when taken on its own, neither possessed a stable