

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

Susan Pollock 

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.

A central feature of humanism, according to Greer, is that it is grounded in exclusion of those who are defined as not fully human. In an argument reminiscent of Edward Said's definition of Orientalism, Greer contends that this exclusion, this creation of non-human people, is part and parcel of defining who *is* human; humanism is 'an intellectual project devoted to colonialism, slavery and racial capitalism'. The solution he proposes is to embrace 'counter-humanism', a critical approach developed in Black Studies.

In order to highlight the problems he identifies in both humanist and posthumanist approaches to the human, Greer adopts a terminology in which 'human' refers to a culturally constructed, ontological category consisting of those who are considered human in specific cultural-historical contexts, whereas *Homo sapiens* designates people in general. The distinction is a crucial one for his argument. The vocabulary is, however, a problem. *Homo sapiens* is fundamentally a biological label, and its use risks leading down the slippery slope of biologism. We may be 'biological creatures living in material worlds', but biology has also been used to racialize, discriminate and oppress. And from an archaeological viewpoint, does this mean that other (sub)species of *Homo* are categorically excluded?

A related point is Greer's contention that counter-humanism incorporates alternative understandings of humanity in which all ways of being human are considered valid. Although this may hold the promise of moving us away from a monolithic and ultimately oppressive categorization, it still begs the question of what it is that constitutes 'being human'. Is it indeed a 'purely' biological category? The issue of categorization more generally would merit some further consideration here. I was also surprised to find no mention of Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality. While it does not resolve problems of categorization, it does place a focus on relations among categories, in particular those that produce oppression and discrimination, and relationality is central to much of Greer's discussion.

Greer shows us that Black Studies offers a powerful critique that warrants serious attention and engagement. But it is not the only possible entry point to these issues. Other work originating from critical, non-Western-centric traditions would offer possibilities to further enrich—and perhaps also to challenge—Greer's Black Studies-based approach. I think here especially of the writings of Indigenous scholars such as Zoe Todd (2016) or

Max Liboiron (2021). Feminist literature is replete with the differing concerns of feminists from non-Western traditions, such as scholars from western Asia and north Africa (e.g. Mir-Hosseini 1999; Moghissi 2019).

In a number of places in the text, I found myself wishing that Greer would address directly the question of who is meant by the referent 'we' (see Davis *et al.* 2019). In the hands of some actors and discourses, 'we' turns into a power play, a means of appropriation of an Other under the semantic pretence of acting inclusively. The appropriation of 'we' is a counterpoint to the notion of moral community as discussed by David Morris (1996) or Judith Butler's (2010) concept of whose life is (not) grievable. Moral communities, too, depend on exclusion: 'We do not acknowledge the destruction of beings outside our moral community as suffering' (Morris 1996, 40).

In the end, Greer makes a potent argument for a focus on humans, one that may not sit well with all posthumanists. That position is in some respects not so far from that of Díaz de Liaño and Fernandez-Götz (2021), who contend that the problem is not that archaeology has traditionally been too anthropocentric but that it has not devoted enough attention to humans. Greer insists that we add a crucial element—it is not only a question of a focus on humans, but rather on who is and what it means to be considered human.

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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, posthumanists 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 posthumanist 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