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On Things, Archaeological Theory, and the Politics of Misrepresentation

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When Defense Is Not Enough: On Things, Archaeological Theory, and the Politics of Misrepresentation

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Abstract

This article responds to a growing tide of critique targeting select new materialist and object-oriented approaches in archaeology. Here we take a stand against this critical discourse not so much to counter actual and legitimate differences in how we conceive of archaeology and its role, but to target the exaggerations, excesses, and errors by which it increasingly is articulated and which restrict communication to the impoverishment of the field as whole. While also embracing an opportunity to clarify matters of politics and archaeological theory in light of object-oriented approaches and the material turn at large, we address a number of concerns raised by this critical discourse, which are, we contend, of relevance to all archaeologists: 1) the importance of ontology; 2) working with theory; 3) politics as first philosophy; 4) the concept of the subaltern; 5) binaries and the rhetorical desire for an enemy; and 6) the matter of misrepresentation.

Keywords

critical discourse; weak theory; subaltern; rhetoric; hyperbole

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel reagiert auf eine wachsende Flut von Kritik, die sich gegen ausgewählte Ansätze des Neuen Materialismus und der Object Oriented Ontology in der Archäologie richtet. Wir beziehen hier Stellung gegen diesen kritischen Diskurs. Nicht so sehr, um tatsächlichen und legitimen Differenzen darüber zu begegnen, wie wir die Archäologie und ihre Rolle begreifen. Vielmehr nehmen wir die Übertreibungen, Exzesse und Irrtümer ins Visier, die den Diskurs zunehmend kennzeichnen, die Kommunikation einschränken und letztlich zur Verarmung des Feldes führen. Wir ergreifen dabei auch die Gelegenheit, Fragen von Politik und archäologischer Theorie im Lichte objekt-orientierter Ansätze und des *material turn* im Allgemeinen zu klären. Dazu sprechen wir eine Reihe von Punkten an, die durch diesen kritischen Diskurs aufgeworfen werden und die, wie wir meinen, für alle Archäolog*innen von Bedeutung sind: 1) die Bedeutung der Ontologie; 2) die Arbeit mit Theorie; 3) Politik als erste Philosophie; 4) das Konzept des Subalternen; 5) Binaritäten und das rhetorische Verlangen nach einem Feind; und 6) das Problem verfälschender Darstellungen.

Schlagwörter

kritischer Diskurs; schwache Theorie; das Subalterne; Rhetorik; rhetorische Übertreibung

Introduction

As an academic field of study archaeology has always involved diverse groups of researchers with different and often divergent points of view. Among the many features that uphold its integrity in the midst of such heterogeneity, fair and honest representation is a key component that grounds the mutual trust that we must assume of each other's research. In this article, we air some of our concerns with a growing critical discourse that is targeting select new materialist or object-oriented approaches (e.g. object-oriented ontology and symmetrical archaeology). In our opinion, this criticism runs the risk of sacrificing sound scholarship for what appear to be self-serving political and theoretical purposes. We are specifically concerned with how a rhetoric of suspicion and political and ethical othering often occurs at the expense of reasoned argumentation. Embracing here also an opportunity for clarification on matters of politics and archaeological theorizing in light of the turn to things, we consolidate these concerns into six sections, each of which targets a key issue raised within this critical discourse: 1) the importance of ontology; 2) working with theory; 3) politics as first philosophy; 4) the concept of the subaltern; 5) binaries and the rhetorical desire for an enemy; and 6) the matter of misrepresentation.

When confronted by a situation where we find that arguments are obscured through negation and where critical commotion continues to set the agendas, one basically has three options: one can ignore it, which would be to the detriment of ideas and the communities that are enlivened by them; one can fight it directly, potentially entering into a continual exchange of wounds; or one can evaluate the grounds for these arguments with the hope that laying bare exaggerations will serve as a corrective move towards more impartial and even-handed representation. Admittedly, as will become evident, we have found it impossible to steer clear of the first two options. Due to the sheer scale and fierce rhetoric of the criticism, we have little choice but to ignore, challenge, and question. Still, it is our sincere hope that this paper eventually will contribute to visions of the third option. Though an "ideal speech situation" (Habermas 1990) probably is a futile ambition, the more modest goal of a critical dialogue characterized by more even-handed considerations and generosity is still obtainable.

On the importance of ontology

Archaeology, as any science, must struggle to define what it regards as fundamental entities, as David Clarke observed (1968: 20); it must build into its scrutiny of them some consideration of how those entities exist. Insofar as such considerations lead thought in the direction of the ways humans, things, and natures actually exist, they fall under the rubric of ontology. In recent debates within archaeology, however, there have been attempts to turn ontology into a suspicious word which has exhausted its appeal. As an archaeologist who has profiled himself as a tireless critic of new materialist and object-oriented approaches in the field, Artur Ribeiro (e.g. 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b) argues that these approaches, symmetrical archaeology included, have sacrificed epistemology and knowledge building for ontology. Here we shall examine how Ribeiro formulates this argument in one of his papers (2019a) and examine his claims that "ontology holds little value" for the field and is purportedly far removed from "the empirical record on which archaeological explanations tend to be based" (Ribeiro 2019a: 25).

While there obviously has been a new attention to ontology (Angelo 2014; Garcia-Rovira 2015; Lucas 2015; Alberti 2016; Fahlander 2017; Jones 2017; see also Preucel 2021), to argue that concern with the ways objects exist holds little value for archaeology, or is irrelevant for understanding the archaeological record, is to argue for a highly problematic disconnect between being and knowing. Their entanglement is evident in much of the epistemological and methodological debate in archaeology, for example, in the urge to bridge the gap between a static archaeological record and the dynamics of past societies (e.g. Schiffer 1976; Thomas 1979) or in the canonized disciplinary ambition of reaching "the Indian *behind* the artefact" (see Olsen et al. 2012: 7–12). The "givenness" of such static-dynamic gaps, and to think humans without things, is hard to understand outside the modern ontological opposition of things and humans, rendering interpretation "an act of reaching that which is beyond things, attending to a presumed extra-material domain devoid of objects and non-humans" (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018: 106).

While readers are indeed hard pressed to find sufficient grounds for any rejection of ontology in Ribeiro's article (2019a), they will also struggle to find a denial of epistemology, as he so fervently contends, in what he calls the

new materialist approaches in archaeology.¹ Finding inspiration in actor-network-theory (ANT) and the field of science studies (e.g. Callon 1986; Latour 1987, 1992, 1993, 2005; Callon and Law 1997), early work in the turn to things was mindful of the epistemological consequences of acknowledging things as indispensable constituents of the world and, thus, as fundamentally involved also in human conducts and social trajectories. Without *a priori* assuming what capacities are exclusive to humans and what are exclusive to things and nature, such as the capacity to act, it opened the door to other epistemological possibilities (see Olsen 2010: 129–149; Olsen et al. 2012; Garcia-Rovira 2015). Epistemology, by which we mean the construction of knowledge and the criteria by which it is produced, was thereby jostled out of that narrow bandwidth of humans-among-themselves (compare Barrett 2021). The new attention brought to the *doing* of archaeology (e.g. fieldwork, museum curation, or laboratory practice), moreover, helped with realizing that archaeological knowledge is about much more than observing and analyzing processed and cleansed data. With inspiration also from phenomenology, these disciplinary practices were seen as integral to the formation of archaeological knowledge – revealing a more complex, embodied and ontologically grounded process (Garcia-Rovira 2015: 87; see e.g. Yarrow 2003; Witmore 2004, 2006, 2009; Webmoor 2005; González-Ruibal 2007; Edgeworth 2012; Olsen et al. 2012; Shanks and Webmoor 2013; Grabowski et al. 2014; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014b). In other words, archaeologists inspired by the material turn came to better appreciate the inescapable entanglement of humans as observers with humans as ingredients in a world bristling with quadrillions of other entities – and to recognize nonhumans as mediators that play active roles in the construction of knowledge (Latour 2005: 39–40).

In what often reads as the pursuit of an “appropriate” archaeological theory, it is important to note how Ribeiro routinely foregoes more nuanced argumentation by presenting what we consider to be caricatures against which to ground his own assertions. Such critiques, however, may also manifest the inconsistencies in their own reasoning. Consider, for the sake of an example, Ribeiro’s attempt to convince the reader that the “new materialists,” due to their alleged obsession with ontology, have removed any empirical considerations from their research. Pretending to compare our work in *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (2012) with that of processualist and postprocessualist archaeologists who “would question whether a theory is adequate on the basis of the empirical record”, Ribeiro sets out to “analyze the ways in which ‘ontology’ is expressed and used in the new materialist literature” (2019a: 30, emphasis added). The following passage, however, contains his *full* analysis of a new materialist “theory”:

“For example, Olsen et al. state in a matter-of-fact way that archaeology ‘is the discipline of things’ (2012: 3). This statement is metaphysical in that they are making a claim concerning what archaeology is on an ontological level, not what they *believe* it is, and not what they *believe* it should be. Obviously, one cannot challenge this statement from an empirical standpoint – it is not a statement that can be falsified in the Popperian sense (Popper 2002 [1935]). So what is it that makes the statement that ‘archaeology is the discipline of things’ true? Nothing.” (Ribeiro 2019a: 30, emphasis original)

Rather than elaborating on any of the actual archaeological examples that were presented in the book, Ribeiro simply summons its title as a declarative statement and thereby claims to have revealed and analyzed the ways ontology – and theory – is expressed and used in the new materialist literature. Despite emphasizing “quality controls”, he neither finds any reason to consider what is said about this title (Olsen et al. 2012: 3–6), nor bothers to consult the rest of the book to assess whether it might provide further support. And, whatever one makes of these expectations, it is not too unreasonable to hope that any critic working with isolated statements would consider whether this expression is *empirically likely* in a sense that would not have been the case if said about, for example, history, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, or biology? Though not allowing for Popperian falsification, it is actually possible to assess the empirical likeliness of it.

¹ Many commentators are right to assert that there are differences between various new materialist, object-oriented, and symmetrical approaches. Yet, from here some go on to suggest that one of us erroneously conflated these perspectives under the rubric of the new materialisms (Witmore 2014a; see Cipolla 2018, 66n2; see also Harris and Cipolla 2017: 191n74; Govier 2019). While Cipolla, for example, is correct that Witmore’s assessment “aligns more closely with the object-oriented ontology of Harman” (2018: 66n6), he is wrong to reduce new materialisms to the singular as a perspective solely, and rather formulaically, associated with Bennett and Barad, both of whom follow in the genealogical line of Deleuze and Guattari (Cipolla 2018: 52). New materialisms, as Thomas Lemke points out, “do not represent a homogeneous style of thought or a single theoretical position but encompass a plurality of different approaches and disciplinary perspectives” (2015: 490). Witmore’s 2014 paper was an attempt to reclaim the concept by arguing for a nonreductive, pluralistic materialism that begins with individual objects rather than looking past them for a purportedly deeper reality (for a fine example of this new materialism, see Bryant 2014).

One is also left to wonder what would happen if Ribeiro was to follow the Popperian standard he, quite surprisingly, flags? There are reasons to suspect that many of his statements would inevitably fall prey. Just consider one randomly chosen sentence: “Prior to the rise of the New Materialisms, most researchers in the social sciences, in general, and archaeology, in particular, subscribed to the implicit idea that understanding reality had to do partly with ontology and partly with epistemology” (Ribeiro 2019a: 27). Apart from the obvious confusion this assertion creates with respect to his fierce rejection of ontology as being of “little value”, the statement would of course prove utterly unfit for a test of falsifiability, for how can Popper’s rigid principle provide any epistemological guideline for our scholarly practices? What would have survived of archaeological statements if Popper’s neo-positivist approach, where nothing can be verified only refuted, was made tenable? Adding Popper to Ribeiro’s bewildering array of presumed allies should, to be sure, cause some concern.

While Ribeiro claims his article to be “a rejection of dogmatism” (2019a: 33) it ultimately reveals itself to epitomize precisely such an overbearing declaration of opinion in its rejection of ontology. To assert that ontology and metaphysics are of little use to archaeology, means that we already know how the world is furnished and what world is common to all (Alberti 2016; Viveiros de Castro 2019; see also Harris and Robb 2012).² Such a stance would condemn archaeology to preordained taxonomies and close down the propensities and affordances of the things encountered. Actually, it is ontological considerations that provide a check against blindly deploying our objects as predefined entities. One last example will serve to illustrate this argument.

In trying to point out a logical flaw in our own reasoning, Ribeiro claims that we “admit that *there are real world differences separating living and non-living beings*. But”, he continues, “at the same time, Olsen and Witmore want archaeologists to also recognize living and non-living beings as equal. So which one is it? Are living and non-living things equal or are they not?” (2019a: 31–32, emphasis original). To pose this question Ribeiro must disregard the fact that our denial is not of differences between beings, but that those differences can be reduced to a fundamental ontological rift. Are we to assume the difference between a *Mycoplasma genitalium* and the pyramid of Khufu is *a priori* more fundamental and important than the differences between the pyramid and the Nile? As we state in the article in question (Olsen and Witmore 2015: 189), there are all kinds of differences in the world, between water and structural steel, and between “walruses [and] molds, pine trees [and] Greek *hetairai*,” but to recognize these does not in any way imply accepting living and inert as *the* ontological rift that subsumes all differences in being. Ribeiro claims that there is a logical flaw where none, in fact, exists. As for the question of equality, here one encounters yet another misreading, as recently reiterated by Randy McGuire (2021a), where *equally real* is translated into all beings being equal (see also Van Dyke 2021: 3).

Working with Theory

Much of the criticism addressed above and below comes down to one’s expectations for theory, which for Ribeiro implies that it should be useful and ready to apply (see 2016: 231, 2018b: 2, 6, 2019a: 27, 29–30, 2019b: 39; Ribeiro and Wollentz 2020: 192). Accordingly, since ontology in his view is so far removed from archaeological practice, it holds little value. This expectation that theory should provide a ready-prescribed tool-box for application is common and explains the expressed frustrations when the desired manual is lacking. “All too often”, Ruth Van Dyke writes, “the archaeological reader is left wondering, ‘so just how do I operationalize these perspectives in my work?’” (2015: 6). Textbooks on archaeological theory are content to maintain this longstanding habit, as when Matthew Johnson recently claimed that “the books and articles of symmetrical archaeologists very often lack case studies” (2020: 151). While the validity of this claim hardly would pass a reality check (e.g. Witmore 2004, 2007, 2013, 2014b, 2020a; Webmoor 2005; Olsen et al. 2012; Dolwick 2012; Olsen and Witmore 2014; Farstad-voll 2019 among others; see also Van Oyen 2016; Whitridge 2005),³ it is nevertheless based on such a use-value conception of theory. It also implies setting theory above, and thus apart from, things, and this very dislocation often grounds the urge for “application” (Olsen 2010: 18).

² Moreover, only by appealing to what it is that archaeologists hold in common will the possibility of any mutual ground upon which to co-construct an archaeological synthesis be found (an aspiration that we share with Ribeiro; see Olsen et al. 2012: 3–7; Rathje et al. 2013: 1–4, 396–398).

³ Since it is difficult to identify who are symmetrical archaeologists, a badge also we find problematic, who to include in this list of references is a subject of debate and it is therefore kept short.

The way many critics open their accounts by taking stock of theories, rather than the object of analysis, is highly suggestive. In such instances one might well question whether without those conceptual frameworks set out in advance objects would simply remain banal, fragmented, unruly, disconnected, devoid of any integrity? On the contrary, we hold that theory and archaeological inferences should be placed at risk in light of which things and which pasts they are brought into contact with; for it is in beginning with the turf-covered embankment, the formerly buried street surface, in short, the object encountered, that we may be informed, as well-stated by Þóra Pétursdóttir (2018: 208), “of the potency” of a given theory. For us it is the object and its rapports that open the possibility of the past, not the other way around. One must be prepared to speak of a ceramic jug in-itself and a ceramic jug for us or for others with equal favor. Indeed, it would make little sense to undertake archaeological research if our objects were *a priori* entangled with the Argive assembly or festivals of Hera in the 4th century BCE, if they already pointed beyond themselves to such erstwhile pasts. It would also be overly reductive to assume such situations could exhaust objects of their excess capacity; that is, their potential to offer something more of themselves in other contexts.

Archaeologists have long advocated for a *strong theory*, that is, conceptual abstractions formulated at a general level in order to make sense of different situations. In contrast, we speak in favor of a *weak theory* (Sedgwick 1997), theory that “comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don’t just add up but take on a life of their own as problems of thought” (Stewart 2008: 72; see Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018). This may involve a series of cues or guidelines (Olsen and Witmore 2015; Witmore 2020b), which has virtue as thought aids to assist with being as creative and subtle as the situation at hand. Importantly, theories in this weak conception are themselves responsive to the circumstances and beings with which they are brought in connection. As such, “(w)hile [theories] are themselves of certain weight and figure, and inimitable and irreducible in that sense, *it matters what they matter for*; it matters what things they bump into, what networks and meshworks they become entangled in” (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018: 115, emphasis original). This means working with theory is precisely that: *work*. It involves creativity, listening, and tuning. Its ends cannot be foretold; its significance cannot be established in advance, for “its actual becoming is realized only through association with things, with the world, which adds an aspect of volatility to its potential future. Any theory is more than what it is doing right now” (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018: 115). Such labors are commonly thought of as requiring too much effort; and yet, our objects, and archaeology, demand no less. By taking this commitment seriously, we should try to eschew mimesis, for each and every archaeological situation is utterly specific and, thereby, unique. Since the value of an interpretation is to be found in its inventiveness and specificity, the true significance of the turn to things should lie in an idiosyncrasy that eludes emulation (Witmore 2020a).

Against such a formulation of *weak theory*, which trusts that a possibility will arise out of the engagement (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018; see also Edgeworth 2012), it is rather presumptuous to assert that one is “blindly following trends” (Ribeiro 2019b: 42) for this may turn out as suggestive of a true blindness. Archaeologists have long donned the colors of a secondary science, which situates the field at the lower end of a chain reaction, where thought follows on theoretical innovations happening elsewhere. It is beyond common to encounter an attitude towards divisions of labor where novelty of thought within archaeology constitutes but another instance of mimesis by derivatively importing ideas from beyond. Not only does such a highhanded attitude fail to appreciate a bricoleur approach to theoretical formulation (Olsen 2010: 12–14), which abjures *strong* theoretical templates, it also proceeds into the world with imperatives of conceptual dominance (Viveiros de Castro 2019: 301). The foregoing critical sensibilities are often guided, not so much by a hermeneutics of suspicion as by a negative semantics, which chooses to see not what is there, but what is not there *for the observers*. To maintain such an attitude is to not value archaeological theory, or the philosophy of archaeology, highly enough.

Politics as First Philosophy

Another noticeable feature in the current archaeological debate relates to how a number of archaeologists have taken to the barricades to defend people, politics, and critical thinking from the alleged dangers posed by new materialist and object-oriented approaches (of late, see McGuire 2021a, 2021b; Van Dyke 2021). Foremost among the assaults is the accusation that a turn to things inevitably and proportionally implies a turn away from people (Cipolla 2017: 226; Van Dyke 2021: 2–3; although see Cipolla 2018). Care for things has ostensibly replaced

any more palpable concerns for human phenomena (Barrett 2021: 6); in fact, “*the truth is* that things have been progressively elevated to the category of new subalterns” (González-Ruibal 2019: 56–57, emphasis added). An alternative version of this proclamation is that humans are objectified and, in so doing, all those diabolic features ascribed to things in 20th century critical theory are acutely intensified (Pollock et al. 2014: 156–157). “If ‘things are us’”, Van Dyke reasons, “then humans must also be considered things [...] a stance that would allow and *even encourage* us to think of humans *as commodities*” (2015: 19, emphasis added).

A frequent allegation leveled against our own contemporary archaeological work – because it purportedly is concerned only with the “thingness of ruins” and with letting “things speak for themselves” – is that it is apolitical and consequently devoid of any critique; that is, any critique of capitalism (e.g. Cipolla 2018: 52; Van Dyke 2019a: 216, 2021: 2, 5). According to Sefryn Penrose, Olsen and Pétursdóttir’s work on modern ruination “*willfully sidesteps* both broad issues of economic change and detailed understandings of the complexity of place... and a *real critique of capitalism is missed, again*” (Penrose 2017: 186, emphasis added). Living in a world “where all archaeology is surely political”, this approach strikes Van Dyke “as an abnegation of responsibility” (2019a: 220), while for Alfredo González-Ruibal it represents an imprudent agnosticism; “good for policy, but... bad for politics” (2019: 57). Adding further nuance to this contrast, González-Ruibal is worried about how “(i)n the case of archaeology, Olsen and Pétursdóttir (2016: 42) explicitly avoid the political debate surrounding marine debris... and they prefer to focus instead on the things themselves, showing “concern for their voyages” and exploring how their “gathering and entanglement underpin alternative and less anthropocentric understandings of ‘care’” (González-Ruibal 2019: 57). Our dealings with these very things themselves wreck on the shoals of ethical irresponsibility by allegedly privileging innocent and trivial things at the expense of more urgent monstrous and morally despicable concerns on the horizon (González-Ruibal 2019: 176–178; McGuire 2021a: 5–6; Van Dyke 2021: 4–5).

One thing to be noted about this criticism is precisely what González-Ruibal aptly addresses with respect to those whom he, in a different context, regards as advocates of political pluralism; that they tend “to present themselves as *the* political approach *par excellence* and to occupy all the space of critique” (2019: 51). From this totalizing and self-gratifying radicalness emerges a blindness for those politics, responsibilities, and concerns that don’t comply with the seemingly compulsory rules of academic political and ethical posturing. It is precisely this blindness that prevents one from seeing how a focus on things’ unruly afterlives is crucial for understanding precarious and troubling phenomena such as marine debris and raising consciousness about its entangled causes and complexities. When González-Ruibal finds it necessary to warn “those people celebrating things” to be “careful to not forget the politics that are involved in their production and the moral and political inequalities that exist within things” (2019: 57), he makes manifest the urgent need for such considerations. While Marx rightly observed that capitalism had alienated things from their context of production, what now should give further pause for thought is how we, during the last century, also have become increasingly estranged from their disposal. Directing the focus at what becomes of the masses of things we throw away, that is, on things’ action and interaction when they escape our management and end up as marine debris, for example, is something that we find to be absolutely crucial for understanding what is happening with the world today. Here, political stock phrases provide little guidance. This understanding, moreover, relates directly to the expert knowledge archaeologists have of disposals, waste, and thingly aftermaths, which holds the potential for a prime disciplinary *response-ability* (Haraway 2013; see also Reno 2014).

What we actually find insufficient and potentially problematic in the current situation is the overdrawn notion that the *monstrous* in things is predefined through human aspiration and production (González-Ruibal 2019: 171–178). From such an anthropocentric position it becomes difficult to understand how ordinary and intentionally innocent things and practices, including synthetic clothes, plastic toys, rubber granules (for artificial football-pitch turf), solar panels, internet gaming and livestock farming become radically transformed into hyper-monstrous beings such as marine debris, greenhouse gasses, and toxic pollutants. Indeed, throughout the past, things and natures have repeatedly revealed themselves to be too unruly and unpredictable to loyally follow human programs and satisfy our intentions for them, leading to many hard-felt lessons and reminders. Probably never before is this unruliness more evident than today when things in their hyper-monstrous gatherings conspicuously overflow all of our “reserve out-sides,” environments where the unwanted consequences of our actions previously were kept securely out of sight (Latour 2009: 143). Given how these things currently bombard us with involuntary memories of deficient presents, how is it possible to think of politics and disciplinary responsibility without being concerned with their *afterlives* and the unforeseen agencies that may be released (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2019; Michałowska 2020; Witmore 2021)?

It is precisely these recalcitrant things, this supermodern *heritage*, that also set the very agenda for the project that González-Ruibal targets in his criticism of Olsen and Pétursdóttir (González-Ruibal 2019: 57). Strangely he neither mentions nor discusses that this project, *Unruly Heritage*,⁴ involves a radical political rethinking of heritage, which no longer is conceived of as a sheltered niche for the favored few, but is broadened radically to embrace the very tangible legacy of obnoxious things relentlessly and ever more rapidly accumulating everywhere (e.g. Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016; Olsen and Vinogradova 2020; Pétursdóttir 2017, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Farstadvoll 2019; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2019; Figenschau 2020). Moreover, contrary to common assumptions in “critical” heritage studies, this project works from the premise that heritage – and the past – is not an optional, willed-for, and controlled condition but a reality inevitably and involuntarily *lived with*. Understanding the articulation and impact of this legacy is of course crucial, as seen, for example, in our studies of Soviet heritage in the Russian north and how it affects memories, everyday lives, and prospects for the future for those stuck with this persistent and pervasive past (e.g. Olsen 2013a, 2013b; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2016; Olsen and Vinogradova 2020). With this in mind, it is remarkable to read González-Ruibal’s conclusion that, “(w)hile this is a fascinating project that doubtless expands our archaeological imagination, its disinterest in the politico-economic causes of marine pollution and its consequences is worrying...” (González-Ruibal 2019: 57). Needless to say, our wording will hardly pass the social critics’ conceptual litmus test to be certified as “political.” Still, how can one purport to understand and act responsibly without being concerned with how things and natures ‘care’ for the obnoxious and dangerous, with voyages of drift materials and how they gather, where they harbor, and intrude (Pétursdóttir 2017, 2020a, 2020b)?

The criticisms addressed above turn out to be rather self-serving, for to claim any turn away from the human element can only be levied through the narrowed aperture permitted by a human-centered politics. It is by upholding the Cartesian bifurcation of the world into humans and everything else that one leaves room for the taxonomic exception that is less-than human (Back Danielsson 2017: 169).⁵ If, as McGuire (2021a) and Van Dyke (2021) suggest, we reduce everything to an impoverished choice between two sides – humans and nonhuman – we narrow political concerns and fail to grasp the nature of past collectives or the ecological stakes at play in our own catastrophic times. Meanwhile, when politics becomes an author’s first philosophy, that author may betray an archaeological obligation to resist appropriating things over to pro forma stories that happen to fit whatever political agendas and tropes they currently may subscribe to. Such critical politics risk becoming tautological, for in identifying political actors they often sacrifice the details for the known telos.

While it is important not to ignore the significant role of political engagement for scholarly conduct, it is equally important to acknowledge the difference between scholarship and activism. Activism, to be sure, has often proved instrumental in courageously directing scholarly attention to previously neglected issues and inequities, but when it becomes a default mode of research, it may easily deprive us of our advantage in the articulation of a complex and often contradictory reality. Just as an idealized sense of matter that assumes humans to be a fundamental ingredient to be found in every situation may not prove helpful in understanding present dangers, the inability to articulate a more encompassing picture of matters of political concern actually disarms academic scholarship and renders us ineffective precisely when we are needed most.

Contrary to what our critics assume, we do not see politics as something to be abandoned, but as something in need of careful recomposition. Recomposition is not the same as beginning with common matters of concern, an issue, around which various stakeholders arise, and for which the Jackpile-Paguate Uranium Mine, an erstwhile collection of open pits, may provide an example. While members of the Laguna Pueblo, the EPA, British Petroleum, environmentalists, and others are drawn to the erstwhile mine, it should be a cause for reflection that any human representatives of these collectives probably enact less power and influence in the state of New Mexico than the mine itself, which is one of the greatest emitters of radionuclides into the Rio Grande. Indeed, once listed as a Superfund site, the partially remediated mine, which weighs tragically on those Laguna peoples, fellow creatures, and plants that continue to live with it (Witmore 2021), becomes one of the larger political actors in the state. At the same time, what has become of the mine – a more-than-gigantic archaeological object, which cannot be properly

⁴ <https://unrulyheritage.com>.

⁵ Of late, Van Dyke seem to have changed her stance (2019b), though grudgingly, as she remains “critical of attempts to erase distinctions between people and things” (2019b: 41). As most of the work to which she refers (which must be inferred through an oblique self-reference to her 2015 edited volume) seeks to articulate distinctions without assuming oppositions or what things otherwise may be in advance, such a repudiation suggests the sustained propagation of a straw person.

comprehended by standing “in defense of anthropocentrism” (Cipolla 2017: 227; Van Dyke 2016: 18–20; 2021) – crushes politics thin with its heft and it will continue to do so for upwards of 10,000 years. “The ontological state of exception granted to *anthrōpos* in our intellectual tradition,” Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argues, “was the ultimate justification, or cosmological precondition, of the Anthropocene” (2019: S298). What nevertheless is needed is an object-oriented politics that does not assume “the world to be the same as we think it is” (Harman 2018: 142).

The Concept of the Subaltern

An almost compulsory element to recent critiques that relates to how one of us has transformed things into the “new subaltern” permits an opportunity to explore how hyperbole proliferates within this critical discourse. Proceeding from the insight that Olsen’s work abuses and corrupts postcolonial theory through his use of the concept “subaltern,” Cipolla elaborates on the worrying consequences of such a consideration:

“At first the message appeared deceptively similar to the postcolonial critique. Bjørnar Olsen warned us that ‘archaeologists should unite in a defense of things, a defense of those subaltern members of the collective that have been silenced and ‘othered’ by the imperialist social and humanist discourses’ (2003, 100). As we hear and read more about this critique [...], it becomes strikingly clear that it actually sits on ground very different from that of postcolonialism. As the argument goes, things are now in need of liberation. We gasp to think that the medicine bundles and bottles of this book are a new type of subaltern! [...] As we work collaboratively on reservations with *actual* colonized peoples, how are we to explain that – from our perspective – the time of liberating people has passed, and it is now time to decolonize things? [...] [T]his narrative has the potential to become quite dangerous if left unchecked or adopted uncritically.” (Cipolla 2017: 226)

Just as a modest disclaimer to what is presumed with this rhetorical posturing, pitting those who work with bottles against those who collaborate with “actual colonized people” (Harris and Cipolla 2017: 199), much of Olsen’s archaeological work for the last four decades has focused on the indigenous Sámi, where postcolonial perspectives also have been deployed to address the asymmetries in global archaeological discourse and practice (e.g. Olsen 1986, 1991, 2000, 2007, 2016, 2019; Hedman and Olsen 2009, Olsen et al. 2011; Hansen and Olsen 2014). One lesson learnt from these decades of work is that one should be careful imagining oneself as the “absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (Spivak 1988: 292), especially when the outcome is morally and theoretically self-serving. Another, and equally important, lesson is to be careful when thinking of the term “postcolonial,” and the discourses to which it applies, as self-evidently applicable – and appropriate – to indigenous contexts that are anything but *post*-colonial. Leaving that aside, we shall restrict ourselves to select exaggerations relating to the alleged danger posed by the use of the concept “subaltern.”

Firstly, despite the formative significance it took on through Ranajit Guha and subaltern studies, and not least Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s seminal paper (1988), the concept itself is not a post-colonial one. The term comes from post-classical Latin *subalternus*, which means “subordinate”, and whatever refinement the term has been through, it still holds this meaning of being of “inferior rank.” It came into critical theory in the 1930s through the work of Antonio Gramsci for whom the subaltern was understood from a European Marxist, not colonial, perspective referring to Italian groups suffering from the domination of the ruling class: workers, peasants or any other group that were denied access to the hegemonic power (Gramsci 1971). Secondly, and more generally, while concepts emerge and are used as direct designations of phenomena in the world, they subsequently take on secondary or indirect uses as metaphors to think by (Tilley 2002). Our language and discourses are filled with such derivative or metaphorical uses, and it would be to the abysmal impoverishment of thought to do without them. One may, of course, discuss the appropriateness of these uses. To what extent, for example, would such a suitability test hold for Cipolla’s own application of the concept “consumption” in an indigenous context (Cipolla 2017)? Indeed, were we to circumscribe consumption as an *a priori* capitalist term, under what conditions would it be appropriate to apply this consumerist concept to how people disregarding time and place think, make use of, and live with things (cf. Glassie 1999: 77)? Let’s not be surprised if, by using questions so formulated, our answers turn out as expected.

For the record, the concept of subaltern, in its one sentence appearance in Olsen’s 2003 paper, was used metaphorically to address the subordination of things and matter to discourse. As it never was a plea for equivalence or replacement, as alleged in the context of other critiques (e.g. Fowles 2016; González-Ruibal 2018: 354, 2019: 99; de Liaño and Fernández-Götz 2021: 4; Preucel 2021: 4), to claim that things are the “*new* subalterns” is more

than a bit exorbitant. It is also beyond challenging to comprehend the excessively elastic reasoning that would assume a rather grim conflation “of human exploitation and suffering with the being of things” (McGuire 2021a: 5). Similar concerns with things’ marginalization in social and cultural studies were raised by a number of scholars (e.g. Miller 1987; Joerges 1988; Latour 1992, 1993, 2005; Serres 1995; Löfgren 1997; Schiffer 1999; Brown 2003; Trentmann 2009), as deftly captured by Karen Barad’s observation that: “Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter” (2003: 801). In this new appraisal of things, metaphors and human analogies flourished; Alfred Gell likened things and artworks to human groups (“they come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations”) (1998: 153), and of course, to patients and actors. The latter, and thus the capacity of agency, undoubtedly became the most popular conceptual anthropomorphism (see Olsen 2013b for a criticism) and is also frequently applied by our critics. Metaphors were also used to talk about things’ subordination, “(l)ike humble *servants*, they live on the margins of the social doing most of the work but never allowed to be represented as such” (Latour 2005: 73, emphasis added). Bruno Latour’s works in many ways epitomize the use of metaphors to address things’ subordination (1992, 1993), and by analogy he even conceived of ANT as part of subaltern studies.⁶ As a call for action, the turn to things was likewise frequently narrated as an act of resistance or liberation, being described as, for example, a “battle fought against mainstream social science” (Miller 1998: 3), as an opposition “to the long dictatorship of human being in philosophy” (Harman 2002: 2), or in Olsen’s case as a plea for archaeologists to “unite in the defense of things” (2003: 100).

Archaeology, however, differed. Despite having our trade seriously affected by things’ neglect in social and cultural research, archaeologists never turned their back to them, and it was in this capacity that we were urged by Olsen to take a lead role in their repatriation. Against this background, Cipolla’s insistence that this ultra-specific and limited usage of the subaltern concept should imply that *he*, as an archaeologist deeply concerned with things, suddenly would have to conceive of his familiar archaeological record as a new type of subaltern becomes an artifact of his own excess. This exaggeration is sharply intensified with the related claim, that it would impel him to explain to *actual* colonized humans that “the time of liberating people has passed, and it is now time to decolonize things.” If this fantastic scenario was the most plausible outcome for Cipolla, then we all would have cause for worry. Were one to follow this line of thought, then it would be pertinent to ask whether the common depiction of things as agents and actors likewise has spurred among critics a massive return to the field to broadcast that the time of human agency has ended? What, the critic might ask, are the logical and linking arguments behind this oppositional obsession?

This, however, is precisely what Severin Fowles insists on having discovered by attributing the turn to things to the successes of postcoloniality and politics of representation. “As it became more and more difficult for Western scholars to make authoritative claims about other people,” he conjectures, “anthropologists began to explore the advantages of treating (non-human) objects like (quasi-human) subjects” (Fowles 2016: 12). In things, object-oriented anthropologists and archaeologists found a “safer domain”, the “perfect subject” as a substitute for silenced and oppressed humans on behalf of whom they could no longer claim representational authority (2016: 24–25). Could the success of Fowles’ suspicious hermeneutics, which has become a favorite plot in the marketplace of critical reaction (see Cipolla 2017: 225, 2018: 53; González-Ruibal 2018: 354, 2019: 57, 99; Ribeiro 2018b; McGuire 2021a: 5; Van Dyke 2021: 3), result from the fact that it has itself been “left,” to borrow Cipolla’s (2017: 226) language, “unchecked or adopted uncritically”? Could such a refrain perhaps be facilitated by the self-confirming moral justification it provides?

We shall leave this aside and also avoid investigating further whether Fowles, by subsuming the turn to things to deeper, and all-too-modernist, historical processes, actually reproduces the colonial attitude he wishes to unmask in the work of others by forcibly disregarding any scholarly rationales other than his own for embracing things (Witmore 2020b). Instead, we wish to inquire into why and how nonhuman things provide a safer and more perfect domain than the world of humans. It would be unfair, given Fowles’ wider oeuvre, to reduce this to an implicit presumption of things as passive and pliable subjects sitting in silence waiting to be embodied with whatever meaning object-oriented archaeologists or anthropologists would like to impose on them. And yet, we still are baffled by

⁶ “The voiceless that I retrieve, which were of interest to ANT, were precisely those left entirely off the [critical] radar, which were nonhumans and ... materialities of other sorts... In that way, ANT is still part of subaltern studies. It is interested in the colonial object [in the form of nonhumans]” (Latour 2017: 421; interview in Walsh et al. 2017: 421).

the “perfect” timing of this thesis’ release. For how is it possible to regard things as ideal matters of consideration precisely at a time when their “voices” are louder than ever, when they constantly assert themselves as anything but Fowles’ perfect and ready-to-be colonized “subjects” (Farstadvoll 2019: 18)? In what way are archipelagos of sea-born debris, plastic detritus in marine animals, melting glaciers, greenhouse gases, Khrushchyovka apartment blocks, still effective sections of WW2 barbed-wire and land mines, Sámi sacred places, New York City, the Jackpile-Paguete Uranium Mine or the Alta-Kautokeino River hydro-electric dam “perfect subjects”?

If things offer no resistance to such academic onslaught how can they be trusted to play any role in articulating the conditions of existence of the human subaltern? And this returns us to Cipolla’s disavowal of fighting against the ignorance and neglect of things; why should this pose a danger to subordinate peoples past or present? Is it not rather the case that being attentive to and enhancing the status of their things can be both revealing and emancipatory as shown by numerous studies (e.g. Glassie 1975; Deetz 1977; Lightfoot 2006; Burström 2007, 2015; Welinder 2007; Andreassen et al. 2010; King 2012; Voss 2018; Figenschau 2020)? As González-Ruibal rightly notes in his discussion of logocentrism and the impossibility of a true subaltern discourse:

“What I think we can do is be less concerned with discourses on discourse and pay more attention to things. I would argue that despite its traditionally secondary role, things may be the path not to the subalterns’ speech, which is an unrealisable illusion, but to appraise and manifest their conditions of existence.” (González-Ruibal 2019: 106)

To achieve this necessitates an understanding of, and reaction against, things’ othering as marginal and secondary to discourse, which not the least has affected the things of those sidelined by the dominant discourses both locally and globally. This aspiration, by the way, aligns well with Gramsci’s ambition to study those who are subordinated alongside their silenced pasts; an ambition that, in all respects, we share in our own work at Sværholt or Teriberka, on the Argive Plain or Samothrace.

Against Binaries? On the Rhetorical Desire for an Enemy

If one were to determine the fundamental rationale for the turn to things on the basis of critical assessments alone then few reasons specific to the object would prove to be as strong as the rhetorical desire for an enemy. Here, again, Cipolla writes:

“For me [...], the war on binaries becomes dangerous when it forces us to lose sight of other important issues in our work and, more importantly, in our world. If we decide that intellectual binaries are our only and biggest foe, perhaps we need to stroll back to the windows of our ivory towers and look outside. Out there, it seems that people have other problems. [...] It is possible (and I would venture to say likely) that many of our indigenous colleagues and collaborators have other issues on their mind than dualisms [...] it seems that the more we wage a war against intellectual binaries in archaeological theory, the deeper we drive the wedge between us and the rest of the world.” (Cipolla 2017: 227)

If intellectual binaries were indeed our “biggest foe,” then navigating the current situation would prove to be far less stressful as one could return to well-tried habits of dialectical thought. Here, rather than assess an argument in light of the fidelity to its object and the purposes that it serves, one may always appeal to a larger contradiction. One may ignore the explanations of any text in order to draw it back into the ring of relevance that comes with division, negation, and exclusion. Still, we might question whether or not the outcome of this critique is to reproduce these binaries by being inclined to constantly repeat that any concern with things instantly involves an equal amount of forgetting people? For only by bringing humans and everything else into opposition would one be inclined to assert that a turn towards things would “run the risk of turning away from people” (Van Dyke 2016: 7; see also Barrett 2014; Pollock et al. 2014; Van Dyke 2015, 2021; Cipolla 2017; Ion 2018; González-Ruibal 2019; McGuire 2021a, 2021b).

Moreover, what are we to make of the suggestion that by looking beyond the rooms and corridors of academic institutions we will find that binaries are foreign to indigenous concerns? With what noble certainty does one know that “our indigenous colleagues and collaborators have other issues on their mind”? What are we to tell those indigenous peoples who have fallen victim to precisely this thinking which subjected them to the hierarchical dichotomies of *Kultur-* and *Naturvölker*, primitive and developed, peoples with and without history, binaries that paved the way for their colonial subjugation, and which also led to their inclusive and encompassing worldviews

being condemned as superstition and dangerous fetishism? Should we tell the Sámi, for whom this intellectual heritage is an important part of their struggle today, that the prohibition of their religion, prosecutions and executions of their *noaidies* (shamans), and destruction of their sacred sites and drums from the late 17th century onwards were just some incidental happenings? Or, that it had nothing to do with the fact that they granted life and kinship to far more beings than humans and distributed agency more evenhandedly?

Likewise, those content to reassert the old ivory tower critique of “vainglorious academics” detached from “‘real-world’” problems (Van Dyke 2015: 20; Cipolla 2017: 227, 2018: 53; Harris and Cipolla 2017: 198–200; see also Babić 2019: 823), may easily dismiss pleas for careful consideration by weighing an argument in its own terms. And yet, from where does the academic author speak, when he, as a Curator of North American Archaeology at the Royal Ontario Museum, claims that we are “widening the chasm between intellectual archaeology and the real world” (Cipolla 2017: 227)? From which book, journal or publishing house do we read that we will be “forced into further intellectual exile,” and by which dominant language (Wolters 2013)? Such arguments expose their authors to the trap that comes with sophistic academic hypocrisy, for in their articles not only do they assume “real-world” exploits to be less alienating and reductive than intellectual ones, but they are also careful not to scrutinize the affordances of their own cultural and academic privilege, including their positioning within the global political economy of archaeology (Olsen 1991; although see Cipolla et al. 2019).

The critique that assumes an inevitable opposition between theorizing and “plain speech” is as old as scholarly professions. However, when the media of academic speech are judged in light of contexts for plain speech, the problem is not always with the style of arguments, rather it sometimes comes down to problems of translation. And here, while no academic is free of responsibility – as better communication is always possible – it is to archaeologists that fall the obligation to negotiate the nuances of these different speech acts in different contexts, whether with other colleagues or with those communities we serve, and this is particularly pertinent given where we find ourselves in these precarious times.

Making Meals of Crumbs: On Misrepresentation

It may be of interest to note how this critical discourse forms, gathers, and acquires strength. It commonly, but not always, starts by raising an objection to a single statement or an isolated term; it then proceeds to include references to entire works as expressions of the same; and soon, little else can, or need, be said about the targeted research beyond compulsory declarative statements: they elevate things to the “new subaltern;” they let “things speak for themselves;” they make “everything equal,” forget people, disregard ethics and shun social responsibility, and, of course, avoid any political critique – that is, of capitalism. Leaning on such a discursive – and strategic – formation, where “groups of texts acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves” (Said 1989: 20), one generally no longer feels a need to provide measured arguments beyond the repetition of stock phrases and established taxonomies. Deep reading, the careful vetting that involves looking for that which complicates or speaks against self-confirming simplifications, becomes largely redundant. The critical discourse presses forward with its habituated repertoire of concepts – i.e. ethics, care, responsibility, critique, and politics – which are mostly taken for granted as normative givens that require no explanation among partisans. The general effect is that one rarely questions what is meant by these terms or wades too deeply into the nuances of how opinions may differ. Against this self-assured discourse, moreover, there seems little reason to reflect on how these sincere concerns with ethics and responsibility may apply with respect to one’s own criticisms, scholarship, or collegiality.

To attempt any evaluation of specific examples within this critical discourse will, no matter how sober, likely strike many colleagues as ill-tempered. Still, if such an unpalatable assessment is what provides the most effective countermeasures against critical misrepresentation, as we contend, then we are willing to take the risk. Thus, we start with a recent article on social memory by Van Dyke (2019a), for, as an extensive review of current trends and concerns under the rubric of memory in archaeology, it gives us an opportunity to assess the costs of exaggeration and critical excess. Here we learn, that “(s)elf-styled ‘symmetrical archaeologists’ have followed Latour and others to elide differences between people and things, examining how things persist in the world without human knowledge or intervention (e.g. Olsen 2010, 2013a; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014)” (Van Dyke 2019a: 216). It may be too much to ask for further elaboration on the notion of “self-styled,” or to exhibit where our colleague

and collaborator Pétursdóttir has presented herself as a “symmetrical archaeologist,” self-styled or not (see also McGuire 2021a: 3, 2021b: 24).⁷ We can positively attest that this assertion is without grounds. What is more alarming is that Van Dyke, in the context of a review, finds it urgent to say *this* but absolutely nothing about the detailed discussions of memory in the works to which she refers. Any reader who actually engages with these discussions beyond the pages of this review will discover that, rather than following Latour, the research in question builds on the work of numerous scholars, and in particular Heidegger, Benjamin, Bergson, and Merleau-Ponty (e.g. Olsen 2010: chapter 6, 2013a).

To question whether such liberties perhaps are taken for the sake of a needed critical contrast requires further consideration. It is, therefore, equally bewildering that Van Dyke proceeds by including the following off-topic and distorted paragraph:

“Olsen and Pétursdóttir find a romanticized beauty in persistent, decaying, quasi-abandoned places such as the Soviet town of Pyramiden (abandoned in 1998), or Eyri, an Icelandic herring cannery (abandoned in 1952). They use photography and archaeological methods to lay bare the artificial divide between archaeologically acceptable, temporally distant pasts and the detritus of industrialization and capitalism.” (Van Dyke 2019a: 216)

Eyri was not a herring cannery. If such trivialities are superfluous to the critics’ ambitions to achieve “detailed understandings of the complexity of place” (Penrose 2017: 186), then it is because hyperbole demands some leeway. One-sided positions retain more flexibility when they come with fewer references, which is perhaps understandable since Pyramiden was studied with Andreassen and Bjerck (Andreassen et al. 2010). Inequitable synopses also gain in strength when they forego qualifying intransitives and aim for direct speech. Yet we are still curious to know where in this book, in the texts to which Van Dyke refers above, or in other relevant works do the named authors find such a romanticized beauty? In the absence of any example, one is left to attribute this ‘finding’ to Van Dyke’s own imagination (see also Van Dyke 2021: 2; McGuire 2021a: 4, 2021b: 26). And if *she* finds beauty, what would that amount to or exclude in terms of memory? We are equally curious to learn how the methods for recording Eyri and Pyramiden are *used to artificially separate* archaeologically acceptable and temporally distant pasts from industrialization and capitalism? Apart from more trivial factual details, such as that Pyramiden was communist and Soviet, one would perhaps have expected, given that Van Dyke is undertaking a review of social memory, some interest in what Olsen and his colleagues actually *did* find in their study of this site and for which the book’s very title – *Persistent Memories* – should be indicative: a wealth of material memories that speak to resistance and opposition in the workers’ apartments and how these numerous counter-memories blend with ‘wish images’ and memories of living, coping, and making homes in an alienating Soviet materiality (Andreassen et al. 2010; see also Olsen 2013a: 211–214 and below)?

With this question of relevance in mind, it is remarkable to read a third exaggeration by Van Dyke with respect to our work, though she here finally addresses the very issue of memory. Noting again a “strange disconnect between symmetrical archaeologists (e.g., Olsen 2010, Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014) and those engaged in practices of counter-memory,” she expresses worry that “symmetrical archaeologists generally stop short of mobilizing their materials for critique” (Van Dyke 2019a: 220). While here she actually provides two references, the strangeness of the choices warrants brief consideration. One of these (Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2014) is an edited volume with 24 chapters authored by a diverse group of philosophers, geographers, artists, and archaeologists, including some (González-Ruibal and Moshenska) whom she, when assessed in light of tone and referencing, definitely trusts to be “engaged in practices of counter-memory” (Van Dyke 2019a: 220).⁸ One way to dissolve overstatement is by providing fair contrasts, which happen to be present in the very volume Van Dyke claims to be otherwise; more specifically, this also includes the chapter authored by us (Olsen and Witmore 2014) and the introduction (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014a: 8–13). We may call attention to further affirmative contrasts in the other cited work, the book by Olsen (2010: see e.g. chapter 8), and in numerous other works where counter-memories are crucial in discussion of ruins and discarded pasts (e.g. Andreassen et al. 2010, Olsen 2013a, 2013b; Pétursdóttir and Olsen

⁷ Despite the fact that Pétursdóttir never has described her work as part of a “symmetrical archaeology” and even has criticized it (e.g. 2012: 56), McGuire still lists her as a “principle advocate” of precisely that (McGuire 2021a, 3). We should again assert that new materialist and object-oriented approaches are more than what – rather one-dimensionally – is depicted as symmetrical archaeology.

⁸ Van Dyke may have confused this work with another from the same year by the same authors (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014b), actually dealing with ruin photographs and aesthetics but there also she would be searching in vain for any romanticized beauty other than her own.

2014b; Olsen and Pétursdóttir 2017; Olsen and Vinogradova 2020; Witmore 2017). These examples show Van Dyke's reprimand for "abnegating responsibility" to be based less on our "preferring to 'let things speak for themselves'" (Van Dyke 2019a: 220), and more on her own exaggerations, which leaves one to question what impels this example of critical discourse to give such leeway to misrepresentation?

An even graver example of misrepresentation is found in two recent and largely identical papers by McGuire. Here he writes concerning the book, *Persistent Memories*, that "Andreassen et al.'s (2010) study of the abandoned Soviet arctic mining town of Pyramiden provides a good example of symmetrical archaeological analysis" that neither analyses "the economic, political and social processes that created the mines and that led to their demise" nor discusses "political economy," but rather presents "a descriptive history of buildings and things and of their post-human decay" (McGuire 2021a: 4). And after repeating this in the second paper, he further adds that the authors "illustrate the study with stunning artistic photographs that aestheticize the abandonment and decay to produce ruins porn. After viewing this study, I realized that my meager skills as a photographer prevent me from ever being a Symmetrical Archaeologist... Ruins porn beguiles the observer with rotting things and human absence" (McGuire 2021b: 26). We leave the reader to decide whether or not this work qualifies as "ruin porn" (for a discussion of the concept, see Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014b), but it would have been more productive if McGuire had focused on what the images actually show: material memories of human life and thus how they may inform a central objective of *Persistent Memories*: "how people lived and coped in the Soviet town" (Andreassen et al. 2010: 24). Contrary to what McGuire asserts, the book actually deals with the processes that created the mine and the town, including the political ambitions involved; it is concerned with the people who worked here, and with how the town operated when still settled (Andreassen et al. 2010: 30–52, 73–90). It also discusses Pyramiden as a project shaped by the communist ideology that governed much of Soviet architecture and city planning (Andreassen et al. 2010: 57–68). Moreover, as mentioned above, *Persistent Memories* goes into detail on how the workers used material means to negotiate and resist this ideology in often challenging ways (Andreassen et al. 2010: 111–135). Surely, the book also deals with ruins and decay but as an issue that problematizes hegemonic conceptions of heritage and the regimes of selection and othering that surround heritage practices (Andreassen et al. 2010: 138–143). And, lastly, against McGuire's general accusation of us being anti-Marxist (2021a: 4, 2021b: 19–20, 23, 25), this is a book that leans heavily on Walter Benjamin's work, especially in the discussion of ruined Pyramiden as a "dialectical image" (Andreassen et al. 2010: 152–159), but also more generally by being inspired by his conception of ruins and images, as well as the method of montage as way of showing rather than telling (e.g. Benjamin 1999). Strangely, McGuire recalls nothing of this, which actually is what this book is about.

For some, these concerns over accuracy and appropriateness may seem out of proportion with larger urgencies, but if so, why are such statements written and why do they get published? The levity of this scholarship seems to be tolerated against a background of presumed ethical superiority where correct sentimentalities probably are believed to be so self-evident that there is little need to provide a reality check. Even González-Ruibal, rather uncharacteristically, offers such an example when he ends a warning to "those celebrating things" by stating: "Pétursdóttir (2012) asks what do things deserve, but," he counters, "there might be things that do not deserve anything—smallpox, for one" (2019: 57). Apart from the fact that even smallpox may deserve something – treatment, medical care, and extinction, for example – the truth is that the question was never posed in the way González-Ruibal here insinuates. Pétursdóttir's entire paper is actually an argument *against* the well-meaning attitude embedded in its title: "What else do things deserve?" Targeting the ambiguous tendency in new materialists' studies to humanize things ("be like us and we shall include you in your difference"), Pétursdóttir criticizes the paternalist attitude of stewardship for "what they deserve and what they want" (2012: 598). As she refers to Latour: "Things in themselves lack nothing, just as Africa did not lack whites before their arrival" (Latour 1988: 193). However, in the light of the general disavowal of her thing thinking (e.g. González-Ruibal 2019: 56–57, 99, 169, 176–177), why bother with such inconvenient details? Could it be because the exaggeration far better serves the argument?

Similar biased or invalid statements are far from uncommon (see e.g. McGuire 2021a, 2021b) and are often made as seemingly "innocent" passing comments and references. In his latest book Oliver Harris, for example, qualifies his suggestion for a posthumanist archaeology by stating that "(s)ome archaeologists have taken this" [i.e. being concerned also with non-humans] "to mean we can write about things without writing about people (e.g. Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2018); that will not be an aim of this book" (Harris 2021: 6). It may seem trivial, but why did this particular paper on archaeological theory end up as an example here? Does it advocate such a position? On which page? And if not, how can one explain that it still is included?

By now, it is, arguably, unnecessary to question the impulse to judge work on grounds ultimately foreign to its object, spirit, and purpose; one need only to point out how making illusory meals of fictitious crumbs impoverishes archaeology as a whole. The following and last example conveys some further measure of this misrepresentation. In a recent paper that aptly is about ethics in the practice of archaeology, Ribeiro and Wollentz set out to defend a statement by Laurajane Smith from what they describe as “attacks from some proponents of New Materialisms” (Ribeiro and Wollentz 2020: 195). The background is that we have argued against Smith’s (2006) claim that heritage is a social construct where value and attention become rather one-sided human projections (Olsen et al. 2012: 201) and which she exemplifies by stating that, “Stonehenge, for instance, is basically a collection of rocks in a field” (Smith 2006: 3). In Ribeiro and Wollentz’s creative rewriting, our argument is turned into a distorted declaration that Stonehenge is inherently heritage independent of human reception, inviting the following “thought experiment” assumed to take this mangled argument “to its logical conclusion” (Ribeiro and Wollentz 2020:195):

“To say that heritage is inherent would inevitably mean that Stonehenge would still be “heritage” even if no humans existed. Nonetheless, a dog in a post-human world would just as gladly pee against the stones of Stonehenge as it would pee against any other stone it may come across.” (Ribeiro and Wollentz 2020: 195)

We leave the reader to contemplate the relevance of this reasoning with its less-than-grandiose imagery. For the sake of balance, here is what we actually say as a response to the full context of Smith’s statement:

“While it is indisputable that many people are concerned with the things of the past, and that many do feel a strong attachment to sites and monuments, it is less evident that this attachment is just an asymmetrical product of emotive narratives and cultural habits. Actually, it may as well be that “significant” sites evoke *their own* importance. Things—monuments, topographic features, landscapes—may stand out as significant because of their unique conspicuous qualities. Stonehenge after all *is* different from other collections of rocks in the field... (its) inherent, exposed difference has played a major role in making it unique as heritage.” (Olsen et al. 2012: 201, emphasis original)

Our entire argument, which can be read in its full length in the work quoted above, is for the difference Stonehenge makes in drawing human attention to itself; that is, the affects and engagements it affords among those humans who attend to it. Nowhere do we suggest humans and their responses to be an expendable part of that heritage equation. Just as humans are indispensable to heritage, so, too, is Stonehenge with its wealth of idiosyncrasies. Why should this be deliberately omitted from Ribeiro and Wollentz’s account, who rather narrate a perverted version to fit a dream experiment of a peeing dog? Given the experiment’s logic and the remarkable ontological flair assigned to one of our companion species in a paper that is purportedly about ethics, it is tempting to ask in turn whether the incident of a dog marking human legs would mean the end to human exceptionalism?

Leaving these assessments in question is more than an act of scholarly propriety, for any assertions as to why these exaggerations continue to proliferate would demand labor in excess of what is possible in this paper. To connect such critical discourse to vindictiveness, resentment, or an urge to convince others that one has overtaken the latest trend would be equally one-sided. While our aim in bringing these exaggerations to the reader’s attention is to make a sincere stand for what is actually being said, we also recognize how a careful evaluation of self-confirming simplifications provides a vital check on the further propagation of misrepresentation and confusion.⁹

Conclusion

Skeptical of the processual tendency to import theories insensitive to archaeology’s differences and specifics and the way it undermined independent archaeological thinking, David Clarke wrote that “the price of freedom is eternal vigilance” (1973: 12, see also Clark 1972). This need for perpetual vigilance and criticism was not for the sake of the criticism itself, but for our objects, for the communities we serve, and for aspiring archaeologists. Such noble intentions, however, are not well served by what Schiffer (2000) calls “redlining”, by which he designates

⁹ One could point out numerous examples of self-serving fabrication and erroneous argumentation in Ribeiro’s oeuvre of critical insights. Why situate ANT as the meta-ontology behind Latour’s Inquiry into Modes of Existence (Ribeiro 2019a: 28-29) when he himself situates it as one among fifteen others (Latour 2013: 63-64; also <http://modesofexistence.org/>)? Why assume, for example, that a “speculative realist” can only be linked to Hegel’s speculative materialism (Ribeiro 2019a: 29n1) and not to the speculative philosophy of A. N. Whitehead? See also the shocking contrast between what he claims that speculative realists argue (Ribeiro 2019a: 32) and what they actually say (Bryant et al. 2011: 4).

an all too common way of simplifying intellectual debates. This may happen when, for example, a well-known scholar who has read a work, or a corpus of works, then writes about it in a particular way, underlining, highlighting, *redlining*, assumed key features or shortcomings. Others, in turn, may find such characterizations to be authoritative and appealing and base both their own judgement of the work and the decision of whether or not to read it on this secondary assessment. Redlining, thus, may render an original work suspect and/or subject to ignorance.

In this paper we have addressed what we consider to be examples of such redlining, though we are aware that we, by this selection and our own characterizations, may have performed some redlining as well. We therefore invite readers to enter into a sincere engagement with the works under scrutiny here and our own work, as well as those of other archaeologists engaging with new materialist or object-oriented approaches, in order to judge for themselves whether or not our response is adequate. No work, for sure, is immune to criticism, and our research makes no exception. Critical dialogue is vital both for individual scholars and the discipline as a whole. In order to facilitate this, however, it is crucial that criticism is based on honest and careful assessment of works both in light of the purposes that they serve and with respect to the fidelity to their objects, their ideas, and their readerships. In this paper we have chosen to examine an emerging selection of texts that we find to amount to the opposite. If future considerations cannot reach, as we hope, other and more productive ambitions, perhaps, at the very least, critics will hesitate a little before indulging in a one-sided game of exaggeration and misrepresentation.

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