

archaeological context articulate how people are dependent on the pipe and its contents. Why are these not brought to the fore by Olsen? A negotiation of material and historical conditions does do this, as does an understanding of the lives of those others who are entangled within that material, but this is in line with Barrett. What is clear is that this archaeology is definitely not about things in themselves.

Humanness as performance in archaeology

To be fair to Olsen, it is important to point out that, although Barrett is remaking his points on contexts and materials and histories, he is shifting his position on embodiment. It is significant that an influencing force in this article is that of the feminist theorist Karan Barad (2003 and 2007). Before discussing performativity and entanglement, it is important to point out that her focus is on the concrete specificities of bodies but that that focus is not located, and it is not static; it is not about interiority or essential humanity – they are volatile bodies (after Grosz 1994). Just like Elizabeth Grosz, Barad does this through a refiguring of the body so that it moves from the periphery to the centre of analysis and, so, questions centrality. I am not sure that a questioning of the centrality of bodies, or concrete specificities of bodies rather than general ‘just-are’ bodies, has ever featured in Barrett’s work before.

What I like about this approach, and what Barrett is picking up on, is that it implies that there are particular ways in which the desires, differences and bodies of subjects work. This is a spatially oriented formulation, frameworks where time is not dominated by space; it is in time (after Grosz 2017). Additionally, key is a consideration of the orientation of beings and the direction of becomings – humanness as performance, where matter is always more than itself and contains possibilities for being otherwise. Barad, and Barrett, reminds us that these productions are particular. There is an orientation of beings, and a direction of becomings – there is not a flat ontology (contra Olsen and Witmore 2015). Non-human relations are important and assemblages are all very well, but we need the particular – the orientation of beings and the direction of becomings need to be marked on: humanness as performance. Barrett is doing this now!

This has been a brief response, and it has focussed on Barrett and Olsen’s critique of each other’s work, but there are two things that I want to say to John Barrett myself. One is that he should be more positive and hopeful about the field of archaeology and the kinds of archaeological knowledge it produces. The other is to ask him to move on from worrying about the effects of Renfrew and Bahn (2004) and, instead, in relation to his work on the politics of context, read Rachel Crellin’s book *Change and archaeology* (2020).

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À la recherche de l’homme perdu

Liv Nilsson Stutz 

Department of Cultural Sciences, Linnaeus University, 351 95 Växjö, Sweden
Email: liv.nilssonstutz@lnu.se

In his article ‘Humanness as performance’, John Barrett takes on the fundamental archaeological challenge of asking how we, through the analysis of material remains, can understand human life in the prehistoric past. The problem has a long and interesting intellectual history, and in 2022, the intention is defined as clearing the way ‘towards understanding how an archaeological

commitment to other forms of humanity might be practiced'. The piece is clearly framed by current trends in the field as it includes references to symmetrical archaeology (Olsen and Whitmore 2015), Peircean linguistics (Crossland and Bauer 2016; Crossland 2021), the writings by Karen Barad (2003, 2007) and an alignment with a subtle postcolonial critique and with the critiques voiced against metanarratives of social complexity in *The dawn of everything* (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). It even makes a point of including the potential promised by methodological advances, and while it captures a zeitgeist of our discipline at this moment, I find myself wondering if it tries to include too much.

A critical ambition of this proposal is the attempt to find ways to understand the past that are not trapped in unproblematised contemporary Western assumptions about the world, and I agree that this is important. Another ambition is to nuance the frameworks proposed by symmetrical archaeology and bring humanity and human experience back to a more central place in the archaeological analysis. Symmetrical archaeology, Barrett argues, reduces humanity to a single form of life. While I think this characterization might be a bit unfair, I agree with him when he stresses that archaeology remains 'our study of how various other historical forms of humanness had created themselves as forms of life relative to other living and non-living things (cf. Thomas 1993, 74)'. While Barrett proposes to centre human practices as the products of distinctive relationships that humans have with other things, he still recognizes this relationship as complex in the sense that not everything we study is the product of human action and that the materiality of our surroundings, or 'the things' as he calls them, also act back on humans in different and meaningful ways. He proposes to address these issues by challenging the concept of the archaeological record as the product of processes of formation, and of humans as 'makers of things.' Instead, he suggests that we view humanity as being created through its own performances and thus centres the relationship between humans and things.

To take on this double challenge, to rethink the nature of the archaeological record and to bring back the human to a more central place in the archaeological interpretative equation, is important, but I find myself struggling with understanding what the paper proposes and how this really changes our understanding of humanity and the past. I believe that theoretical models in archaeology are best tested when they are critically evaluated against how they engage with the material record and what their application leads to in terms of new insights about humanity. To grapple with this, I focus my comment on briefly discussing what the paper proposes concerning three questions: What is the archaeological record? How can we study it? What do we learn?

What is the archaeological record?

One of the fundamental critiques in the paper is voiced against the understanding of the archaeological record as the product of formation processes that centre human action. Instead of looking for what humans did in the past to create this record, we must view it as traces of 'conditions of possibilities'. Drawing on Peirce's linguistic model that views signs as embedded in culture with their meaning, not intrinsic but arising through interpretation, Barrett proposes that we can circumvent the problem of looking for lost cognitive 'meaning' in the archaeological record and instead frame our approach of this material as a search to understand how humans in the past dwelled within these traces through communication and performance that could be either open or closed to them. What would be visible archaeologically – what we could perceive in the archaeological record – would be the relationships between the form of the material and its constraints upon possibilities of human engagement. Here I have two questions. First, what specifically is the nature of the constraints we are discussing here? In my own work on the treatment of the dead human body, it is assumed that possibilities are almost endless in terms of possible practices, and yet culture appears to guide the ways in which death is performed through ritualized practices in a quite limiting manner. The constraints are rarely practical or material (beyond the dynamic physicality of the cadaver) but rather intimately linked to cultural values and concerns. If this is what we are discussing here, then I am not sure how is it different from,

for example, a practice-theory-informed approach that seeks to uncover human practices engaging with materiality in the past by looking at the traces of their presence without relying on ascribed meaning (c.f. Nilsson Stutz 2003; Berggren and Nilsson Stutz 2010). If the burial that we excavate is not primarily a result of human action, then what is it that we study? In other words, how is the performance proposed here significantly different from practice?

Another critique in the paper relates to how the archaeological record is created through the practice of fieldwork, and this concern aligns with the ambition to change archaeological practice. What strikes me as problematic here is the description of contract archaeology, which seems reductive and is likely based on experiences from the UK that cannot and should not be generalized as universal to the discipline. It is a bit strange to see field archaeology still being presented as a generator of grey literature devoid of research questions or reflexivity while in fact the debate on reflexivity in archaeology has been generated almost exclusively around field work (Berggren 2001; Berggren and Hodder 2003). Moreover, as far as the desired bottom-up perspective goes, I would argue that it is often better served by field archaeologists working in local museums and units, who know their region better than any academic archaeologist sweeping in with the ambition of filling in the gaps in a metanarrative model of grand scale.

How can we study it?

How then do we make the leap from observing material traces or residue, in the field, to making inferences about past human experience? The paper presents an interesting theoretical package that combines a view of human culture inspired by Karen Barad's writings with the Peircean dynamic model of engagement with signs, and a focus on performance as strategies of becoming human. I believe that this works as a frame of interpretation, but before we get there, we must start by finding the humans in the residue. I argue that this is not quite the same as viewing humans as the originators of everything – or 'the makers of things' – but rather it is a strategy to sift through the record to get to where we can glimpse the traces of human engagement. This brings me to discussing site formation processes and how they are framed in the paper. The paper critiques the concept of uniformitarianism, but it is unclear at what level uniformitarianism is considered a problem. Is it at the level of understanding natural site formation processes and taphonomy, or is it at another level of interpretation addressing human engagements and choices in the past? In the case of site formation processes, uniformitarianism is a foundational principle that acts as an Archimedean point from which the archaeologist can ground their interpretations, and if done right, this approach does not lead to obscuring the possibilities of human cultural diversity or reduce the past to our own ontological reality but rather clarifies a state – for example, of a decomposing dead body – to which humans can relate in multiple and complex ways. The tying down of certain processes – for example, how a human body will decompose after death in a manner that will be dependent on its immediate and complex context – allows us to highlight, not hide, the complex ways in which humans then engage with these processes in ways that are highly variable. It highlights the centrality of culture, cosmology and ontology – in fact, it provides a canvas for them. So, if we are interested in the microhistories of the residue, and we understand that they potentially are affected both by human performances and natural laws like gravity and temperature, what is so wrong about trying to tease them apart? And why does tracing human practice as a factor become a problem?

What does the proposed model actually add?

This paper makes an interesting theoretical proposal, but what happens when this theory is tested against the record? Do we learn anything new? There is always value in shifting perspectives in archaeology, but to me it is difficult to see that the final implementation proposes anything tangible. The application to the Danebury case underscores the importance of implementing a regional or bottom-up perspective while also considering a political dimension clarifying lines of access and constraint. The value of detail in the lived experience of daily life does not escape me, and neither does

the value of a bottom-up perspective, but the connection to the theoretical model is not clear to me. Despite the call for attention to detail and human engagement with things, the perspective remains at arm's length. What, more concretely, would the performance of the embodied self, moving across that landscape, look like? What precisely would be an object of concern for the peasant gazing at the shifting seasons and the enclosed hill with its shrines and storage units: The plough in their hand? Their leaking shoe? The thundering clouds in the sky? The growing spelt wheat?

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The implications of Indigenous conceptual frameworks and methods for rethinking humanness as performance

Claire Smith¹ and Kellie Pollard²

¹Flinders University, Bedford Park, Australia and ²College of Indigenous Futures, Education and Arts, Charles Darwin University, Northern Territory, Australia

*Corresponding author: Email: claire.smith@flinders.edu.au

We agree with Barrett's argument that the different forms of human life were developed through the performances established between humans and their various objects of concern. However, this argument needs more thought, as his paper is in response to recent attempts to define archaeology as the 'discipline of things', centred upon what archaeologists do (Olsen et al. 2012, 3), and through this is attempting to shift the discipline in a particular direction. In this paper, Barrett argues that 'archaeology should be the study of things with the express purpose of understanding how humans might once have brought themselves into existence as they lived amongst those things'. This approach opens a myriad of responses. We write our commentary from the standpoint of two female archaeologists who have worked with Australian Aboriginal people for many years. While Claire Smith has some international experience with Indigenous peoples in India, Indonesia and North America, her core knowledge is from working with Aboriginal people from the communities of Barunga, Beswick and Manyallaluk, located in a remote area of the Northern Territory, since 1990 and with Ngadjuri people in South Australia since 1998. Kellie Pollard is a Warajuri archaeologist, lecturer and researcher at Charles Darwin University. Her research interests include Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies; Indigenous research methods; and ethics and Indigenous-Australian contact archaeology. She conducted her doctoral research with the Larrakia people in Darwin, Australia.

Firstly, we would like to address a core question raised by Barrett: 'who is best situated to understand the material in the way suggested: those who engage with the material itself or those who treat the material recovered as a record requiring interpretation?' We do this by drawing on our work with Aboriginal people in Australia. The issues raised by Barrett are pertinent to our current Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded project, led by Kellie Pollard, titled *Indigenist Archaeology: New Ways of Knowing the Past and Present*. This project will deconstruct prevailing theory and methods in archaeology using Indigenous standpoint theory (Foley 2003) and Western philosophical theory such as 'forms of life' (Wittengstein 1958). It combines Western and distinctly Indigenous worldviews and conceptualizations for new models of decolonized archaeology. Our approach responds to a call by Anishinabe-Ojibwe archaeologist Sonya Atalay (2014) to address a major challenge for Indigenous archaeology globally: the need