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# Epistemology and the posthuman turn: a critique of the function attributed to ‘theory’ in the latest archaeological models

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## Abstract

In their latest article, ora Petursdottir and Bjørnar Olsen (2017) write: ‘Like drift matter on an Arctic shore, theories are adrift. They are not natives of any particular territory, but nomads in a mixed world’. They then continue to compare the theories’ adrift-ness with that of wood lying on a beach shore, which in turn prompts a meditation on ‘hybrid assemblages’ and ultimately a posthuman condition. While this text makes an enjoyable poetic reading, it is rather representative for a number of works which raise important epistemological concerns- works that have been labelled under the banner of ‘the new ontological turn’. These strands of thought have permeated archaeology via the works of Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, Donna Harway, Viveiros de Castro or Manuel DeLanda. However, from a philosophy and history of science perspective the above assertions are highly problematic. Caught between ontological axioms and ‘practice focused’ approach, many of the new materialist/posthuman attempts end up as being mere poetic reflections, but with very little to add in terms of understanding what have made past assemblages be as they are. It is my goal in this paper to discuss what I see as the main problems for how archaeology frames its relation to the past in light of such works: (1) they raise important epistemological concerns, as they are advancing a world-view which has no criterion for validation or evaluation of the advanced hypothesis; (2) these accounts fail at what philosophers of science would call the generative properties of a hypothesis (they seem to fail at opening up an inquiry to the elaboration of further hypothesis; instead, the focus seems to be on elaborate descriptions); (3) they seem to be using traditional archaeological concepts-agency, theory, context,- with a different, often times unhelpful or ambiguous, meaning. Ultimately, the implication is that while militating for a more inclusive ontological perspective, in reality they fall short exactly in providing a room for acknowledging the alterity of the past. Therefore, I take their case as a starting point for a critique of the function attributed to ‘theory’ in the latest strands of thought in archaeology.

## References

Petursdottir, T. and Bjørnar Olsen 2017. Theory adrift: The matter of archaeological theorizing. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 0(0): 1–21.

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