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Griffith Taylor Lecture, Geographical Society of New South Wales, 2004: Australia and the ‘State of Nature/Native’

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Abstract
This account sets itself against the binarism of physical versus cultural determinism that drives population/environment debate over people’s place on the Australian continent. In reading back into colonial times, it evokes ‘our’ unresolved sense of relation to nature on a continent that has pressed awkward buttons since the time the botanist on Cook’s Endeavour, Joseph Banks, first mused over the apparent contradiction on the east coast of human presence and uncultivated land. Australia’s ‘state of nature’, including its inhabitants, elicited tensions in Anglo-Celtic peoples’ ambiguous relation with nature that have never gone away or been resolved. Indeed, I argue, against the background of what was considered in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought to be a distinctly human separation from, and capacity to rise above, nature, that the Australian state of nature/native precipitated a crisis in prevailing ideas of ‘the human’. As consternation grew into the nineteenth century about the very capacity of Aboriginal people for improvement, and particularly for cultivation, I argue they challenged the basis upon which the unity of humankind had been assumed in Enlightenment thought. They could not be comprehended, according to the prevailing conception of racial difference, as a mere variety of the human. The radical idea of innate human difference may thus be understood as arising out of this incomprehension, as an attempt to account for the ontologically inexplicable difference of the Australian Aborigine. This lecture’s excursion into the origins of ‘race’ is by way of highlighting the uncertainty of the divide between the human and non-human worlds. Imagining an entangled world of living things may help to craft fresh lines of debate about modes of environmental belonging and becoming on this continent that overcome the stale binaries and blind spots of Australia’s population/environment debate.

Keywords: The human, habitability, civilisation, race, nature, posthumanism

Introduction
In this lecture, I would like to use the controversy signalled by Griffith Taylor’s interventions in Australia’s population/environment debate in the 1920s and 1930s (see Powell 1993), as my point of departure for a broader consideration of the ‘clash of civilisations’ that unfolded on this continent from the time Governor Arthur Phillip, soon after the founding of New South Wales, observed:

... few things [are] more pleasing than the contemplation of order and useful arrangement on the land arising gradually out of tumult and confusion ... Perhaps this satisfaction cannot anywhere be more fully enjoyed than where a
settlement of civilised people is fixing itself upon a newly discovered and savage coast. (Phillip 1789, p. 144)

Some 150 years later, Australia’s first professor of Geography, Griffith Taylor, distinguished himself in publicly declaring what by that time so many settlers had found out the hard way (e.g. Heathcote 1965; Meinig 1988; Powell 1988) – that Phillip’s expectation of a widely settled and ‘civilised’ (cultivated) landscape was misplaced, if not naïve.

At the heart of Taylor’s work was an interest in the influences on the settlement and transformation of Australia’s landscapes, and his multidisciplinary synthesis of questions of ‘population and environment’ is a project whose intellectual impulse, broadly speaking, is one I seek to foster and productively augment. For Taylor, human affairs emphatically took their shape and form within the framing circumstances of a ‘more-than-human’ world. This emphasis on the complicities of human and non-human agency in the making of the world’s geographies resonates today for Human Geography when questions of social nature and environment are firmly back on the sub-discipline’s intellectual agenda.

At the same time, however, Griffith Taylor’s work is a complex point of departure for any critically informed Human Geography of nature and environment. For all the emphasis in the likes of Environment and Race (Taylor 1927) on the ‘controls affecting man’ wrought by climate and geology, Taylor’s judgements regarding the capability of the ‘natural resources of the Australian continent’ to sustain men and women had, not ‘man’ in its entirety, but the ‘white race’ (Part III) in its exclusive vision. This was not only a matter of the racism, for which it has already been noted Taylor was very much of his time (Powell 1993, p. 24). His vision of Australia’s development was also profoundly ‘humanist’ in linking population survival, spread and settlement to the physical potential of the continent for the activities of cultivation and pastoralism. The logic at work here bears further critical interrogation at a time in Australia today when a narrow ‘inward-looking nationalism-environmentalism’ (Burnley 2003, p. 267) regarding the continent’s ‘habitability’ reiterates the likes of Taylor’s emphasis in the 1920s and 1930s on the limits of aridity to ‘growth’.

In recent appeals to Australia’s finite ‘carrying capacity’, this ever more popular nationalist-environmentalism not only writes out of future imaginings of Australia’s productivity, the many self-styled forms of indigenous resource management that currently, and have long since, characterised this continent (see e.g. Baker 1999; Gale 1999; Young 1999); it also fosters panic about falsely universalised environmental ‘limits’, foreclosing the option of the doubtlessly difficult work for all Australians of elaborating culturally diverse and locally sensitive regimes of resource management and environmental belonging (for examples, see Head 2000, chapters 8 and 9; Howitt & Suchet 2004). More broadly speaking, and for all its professed concern about reserving ‘the environment’, nationalist-environmentalism paradoxically shuts down a philosophical openness to human-nature relationality. Humans are made the reference point, or ‘centred’, in defensive modes of environmentalism as either (villainous) ‘masters’ or (benign) ‘stewards’ of all other living beings populating a national space thought to be under threat or siege (see, in a different context, Anderson & Taylor, in press).
A philosophical attunement to human/nature entanglement, and its varied manifestation across cultures and technologies, including European-derived and indigenous traditions, is potentially one of Australian Human Geography’s most fertile resources. In the account of Australian nature and race that follows, I take this entanglement as my ‘post-humanist’ point of departure.

In this task, I write against the grain of two impulses in geographic writing regarding the human-environment relation that it was Taylor’s achievement to place on the academic and policy agenda in pre-war Australia. First, this lecture works away from an environmental determinism that, in deploying a culturally specific notion of Australia’s ‘habitability’, has been seeped in humanist constructs of nature as a separate state – one from which humans have progressively and variously taken their distance. This intellectual legacy persists today without it necessarily being acknowledged, in polemical writings about Australia’s optimal population size, as if any such absolute figure can be construed as given in the inert facts of ‘the environment’. For example, Flannery (2002), in proposing a ‘population policy’ that ‘respects the dictates’ of the Australian environment, falls back on a humanist model of the ‘habitability’ of the Australian continent that repays far more critical scrutiny.

Second, I depart from what until fairly recently in Human Geography was scripted as the stance that stood in opposition to environmental determinism on the question of ‘man/land’ relationships. This is the school of thought for whom ‘culture’ is the autonomous hallmark of human uniqueness among the world’s lifeforms – a view that characterised volumes of diverse geographic work in the decades after Taylor wrote. This includes the writing of Carl Sauer and others identified with the Berkeley tradition of Cultural Geography for whom culture’s influence on the environment, or in the words of the seminal book Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth (Thomas 1956), was the intellectual and policy focus. Here, culture was read as the ‘agent’ of landscape change – the implication for the population-environment debate being that it was humans who possessed the uniquely controlling capacity to modify landscapes for better and worse. Take Sauer’s model of ‘the human’: ‘Man alone’, he wrote, ‘ate of the fruit of the tree of Knowledge . . . and thereby began to acquire and transmit learning, or Culture’ (Sauer 1956, p. 2). Such was the instrumental role for Sauer of culture as a ‘universal capacity’ of ‘even the most primitive people, including the obtuse Tasmanians’ (Sauer 1952, p. 11) to effect landscape changes. Notwithstanding the fact that the manifestly variable imprint of the world’s cultures on the earth has, and will continue to, make for infinitely fascinating study, my concern here is the specific (humanist) model of ‘the human’ at stake in such stories of cultural determinism that privilege the ontological properties of people as uniquely ‘meaning-making’ and ‘world-altering’ beings (e.g. Wilson 1992). In scripting humans as always and only ever ‘impacting’ environments from a position that is somehow exterior or exogenous to the nonhuman world, they dramatise a felt sense of ‘the human’ as a mode of being that is realised in separation, rather than continuity, with that world.

Unfortunately, I am unable in the short space available to detail more about these two seminal paradigms of geographic thought as they bear on Australia’s past and present population-environment debates. Instead, I wish to devote the rest of the lecture to an account that sets itself against the binarism and oversimplification that continues to drive population-environment debate over peoples’ place on the Australian continent.
Post-humanism and the question of human separateness from nature

In this lecture, dedicated to the contribution to Australian Geography of Griffith Taylor, I want to dwell at the interface of that persistently fundamental division of western philosophical and theological thought between the sphere of ‘the human’ and the ‘non-human’ – a division that has long since been institutionalised in the academy between the humanities/social sciences on the one hand, and the ‘life’ or natural sciences on the other.

My story signals the strain – the leaky tensions – in the paradigm of humanism on which that opposition (of human/non-human, culture/nature) has depended in western society, both its informal and formal ‘knowledges’. But this opposition of culture/nature, and its driving paradigm of humanism about which I shall say more in a moment, has never been a wholly secure demarcation or ‘line’. Indeed, just as westerners’ relation to nature has always been an intensely awkward and unresolved one – are we ‘in’ or ‘out’ of nature? where are we to draw the borders of human, animal, machine? – so the hold of philosophical humanism on western thought has had a number of crisis points. These moments, as per my account below of the rupture to European humanism presented specifically by Australian nature and ‘native’ inhabitants by the mid-1900s – these intriguingly tense conjunctures in time and space – highlight what has always been an anxiety for western people about ‘our’ place in/out of nature. These instances of ambiguity are of particular contemporary salience at a time when: (1) a growing number of Australians, not least urban dwellers, are confronting the very fragility of their embodied contract with Australia’s environment, and (2) within the domain of the academy, as the lines organising formal ‘knowledges’ are being increasingly debated – not least, the very fundamental one hiving off the ‘human’ from the ‘life’ sciences.

A number of philosophical perspectives have engaged in rethinking of this particular ‘boundary work’. After the writings of Bruno Latour (1987, 1993), there are the by now reasonably familiar tools of actor network theorists which trace the way that human and non-human actors are enrolled into diverse networks through which social action/from agriculture to industry, from research to planning – is enacted and made to happen. Such perspectives are increasingly joined by philosophies of posthumanism that have been set to work on the various dualisms (culture vs. nature,
civilisation vs. savagery) that adhere to ‘the human’ (in Geography; see Castree & Nash 2004).

To give far too condensed an explication of post-humanism’s increasingly disputed and disparate uses, there are the likes of Simon Glendinning’s (1998) On Being with Others, Paul Sheehan’s (2003) Becoming Human, Georgio Agamben’s (2004) The Open, Donna Haraway’s (2003) Companion Species Manifesto, and a recent issue titled Man and Beast of the Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies called Differences (Herrnstein Smith et al. 2004). Each of these interventions, and by now many more, start from the ontological point that the ‘humaness’ of human beings is not pre-given in any absolute contrast with animals, or in any fixed split within human ‘being’ between a layer of reason, consciousness, agency, and symbolising capacity – call it culture – existing like a superstructure on top of an animal base or substrate identified with instinct, emotions and passions. The species specificity of people is not disputed in this philosophy – there is no shrill naturalism at work here which wants to remind us, after Darwin, that essentially ‘we are all animals’. Nor is there the suggestion among post-humanists that people are only ‘fully human’ as and when they reconnect with animals and nature. Instead, post-humanism’s point of departure, after many decades of influential feminist deconstructions of the mind/body duality, is to refuse the humanist account of living things which begins by assuming a radical or pure break between humanity and animality.

Much of the work in the post-human vein has to date been driven by a quest to evoke the agency (or capacity to influence action) of entities in a ‘more than human’ world. Hybrid mixes of human, non-human and machine (from soy beans to cows to door hinges) make up the enlarged ethical constituency of what Bruno Latour (1993), pp. 144-5) has called the ‘Parliament of Things’. Latour convincingly argues that the Cartesian divide between nature and culture, humans and other things, is a false one that has given rise to both epistemological confusion and practical problems. For Latour, it is time to find ways to be in the world of which we are part. Thus, in Geography, Sarah Whatmore’s (2002) Hybrid Geographies calls attention to the ‘interference’ of the non-human in the fabric of social life, while Adrian Franklin (forthcoming) evokes the intertwined histories or ‘dance of agency’ connecting gum trees with their humanly made environments in a piece called ‘Burning Cities’ (in Geography; see also Harrison et al. 2004). This vein of post-humanist work tends to be inspired by an environmental ethics, though one which is distinctly careful to avoid the anti-humanism of animal-rights advocacy, deep ecology, some eco-feminist writings, polemics like William Lines’ (1991) Taming of the Great South Land and, differently, David Suzuki’s (1992) Wisdom of the Elders, where indigenous people are invoked for moral guidance on ‘proper’ ethical relations with nature.

**The human anomaly: Rethinking the rise of ‘race’ from Australia**

My own excavations at the interface of the human/non-human have been somewhat different. Taking post-humanist problematisations of ‘the human’ as my point of departure, I have crafted a critical re-reading of relations between ‘civilised’ and ‘savage’ people in colonial Australia, from Enlightenment to mid-19th century. By that time, the (always already fragile) European demarcation of human/ nonhuman had been called into deep disquiet on the Australian continent. Using texts and materials that are familiar to any Australian historian and historical geographer, I have...
forged a post-humanist path across them that in the space of this lecture I can do little more than signpost (see Anderson, in press).

In essence, I suggest that Aboriginal civilisation (more so than Native American livelihoods in European encounters in the 1600 and 1700s) tested the logic of the Enlightenment paradigm that humans realise their very humanness as they take distance from nature. Indeed, so intractable, I argue, was Aboriginal civilisation to the Enlightenment paradigm of human unity, uniqueness, and development that encounters with ‘the Australian’ and the apparently unimproved Australian landscape elicited the radically anxious speculation by the early 19th century that groups of humans might be innately, racially, constitutively different from each other. In this innatist, and increasingly from mid-century, evolutionary, logic I will argue in more detail later that the Australian became a referential figure in Anglo-American and Australian theorisations of innate human difference and hierarchy.

Generations of scholars across many academic disciplines well beyond Geography have already observed that in mid-19th century Europe and its derivatives abroad, ideas about human differentiation hardened and intensified (eg. Stocking 1968, 1987; Stepan 1982). The idea arose that there were distinct groups of people in the world whose appearance, character, and worth were innate and hereditary. But explanations of this shift to ‘innatism’ are surprisingly difficult to find. Even George Stocking, in his monumental reviews Race, Culture and Evolution (Stocking 1968) and Victorian Anthropology (Stocking 1987), claims he can do no more than ‘suggest speculatively several broader contexts’ (for example, a defensiveness in the US over the abolition of slavery; growing strain on the idea of a Christian timescale with the discovery in the 1830s of ‘geologic time’ and human remains on earth; Cook’s voyages and the avalanche of data on human difference they threw up). Nancy Stepan, too, in her landmark book The Idea of Race in Science (Stepan 1982, p. 41) falls back on the claim that come the mid-19th century, ‘a new biological and racial determinism was in the air’. The most that Jahoda (1999, p. 75) comes up with is that the discovery of geologic time cast general doubt on the biblical account of creation, so ‘facilitating’ the biologisation of human difference.

More recently, the thrust of anti-colonial discourse analysis and critical race theorisation has been to implicate the rise of racial discourse in colonialism’s legitimisation. In critical historiographies of race and racism and some postcolonial treatments following Said (1978), innatism has been attributed – after Foucault’s (1972, 1984) work on the oppositional structure of colonial discourse and its ‘dividing practices’ – to processes of power differentiation under colonialism. In this line of (reasonable though, as will be elaborated later, inadequate) argument, the idea of innate difference is said to have arisen to justify European privilege and possession, with the burden of explanation on the will of the European ‘self’ to domination over its negated or denigrated ‘others’ (e.g. Spurr 1993; Young 1995).

The explanatory gap regarding the basis for the intellectual shift to innatism in Anglo-American and settler Australian thought might not be so important but for the fact that the idea of innate human difference persists to today, even at the remove of nearly two centuries. Paul Gilroy (2000, p. 29) writes that ‘the term “race” conjures up a peculiarly resistant variety of natural difference’. Take the case of Australia’s urban Aboriginals who appear not to fit the stereotype that since colonial times has written
indigenous people into nature (as if to imply non-Aboriginal Australians are somehow out of nature, and ‘especially’ those populating the slick surfaces of the cosmopolitan metropolis). Only in the logic of that stereotype – that Aboriginal people as ‘closer to nature’ are ‘out of place’ in the city – is the presence of such people at Sydney’s Redfern a doomed contradiction. Only in a logic that opposes Aborigines to modernity is Redfern antithetical to the contemporary cosmopolitan urban culture so self-consciously constructed in Sydney and other aspiring global cities. Only in a false logic of purity – of a people thought to once live close to nature, and as such more ‘authentically’ so – is the mix of indigenous translations of colonial culture (see Muecke 2004, chapter 6) superfluous to the modernist project of urban renewal whose revival is currently sweeping through pockets of public housing in Sydney and many other cities.

Race and the Crisis of Humanism

How, and where, indeed, to ‘place’ the Aboriginal? This has been no recent problem. In the forthcoming book entitled Race and the Crisis of Humanism (Anderson in press), I emphasise the perplexity and shock for British colonists in their encounters with people who were unintelligible on a number of fronts. In particular, we shall see they did not fit prevailing Enlightenment ontologies of ‘the human’ as a nature-transcending being. Let me all too briefly read back into those Enlightenment writings to contextualise the disarray presented by the Aboriginal and the Australian landscape come its ‘discovery’ in the late 1770s.

For Enlightenment theorists of human development, Scottish ones in particular such as John Millar, Adam Ferguson, and John Locke, ‘the human’ was a unified concept or category. This was thought in two senses: (1) the world’s people were one before God, and (2) they shared an essence that evinced itself as people raised themselves out of a state of nature. They shared a potential to lift themselves above other life forms which – so it was assumed – merely lived. The world’s people thus shared a fundamental unity, beneath what were (only ever) superficial differences of colour and character. All imagined humanity sat on the scale of human variation, such that savagery was something that could be and, on the continent of America, had been surpassed. Only the circumstances of people’s mode of living, adapted to specific environments of soil and climate, held them back. For this reason, wrote Locke (1960) in his famous essay on property in 1650, ‘In the beginning all the World was America’ (reprinted in 1960). Out of what Locke called the state of nature – that is, the pre-social state before humans joined in the social contract of land enclosure to sustain group survival beyond a hand to mouth existence – savagery would be transmuted into civilisation. Such was the optimistic destiny of people for self-realisation as human.

Come the end of the eighteenth century, Cook’s oceanic voyages and beyond to the ‘Great South Land’ opened vast new vistas. From a very early moment in Australia’s colonisation, there was fascination in what was called its ‘singular’ fauna and flora. John White’s Journal of a Voyage to NSW (published in 1790; reprinted 1962), ripples with descriptions of the ‘oddity’, even perversity, of that colony’s forms of life. The refusal of the country to settle into conventional zoological and botanical categories and the discomfort at making sense of things in what seemed like this upside-down world, was palpable in White’s descriptions. The platypus, in particular,
aroused curiosity (see Ritvo 1997). On the point of taxonomic order, the slippery creature could not be ‘fitted in’. These ‘one-holers’, as they were called, had a single opening that functioned as both an excretory and reproductive system; they were amphibians, but also terrestrial; rather than hatch their young, they gave live births. Were or were they not mammals?

And what to make of the inhabitants of this ‘state of nature’ in Locke’s term? This was no small problem. Especially problematic, as numerous geographers have noted in different ways (e.g. Powell 1988; Head 2000; Whatmore 2002, chapter 4) was the absence on the surface of the land of any visible traces of cultivation, an oddity that seemed immediately to implicate its people. Even the so-called ‘Hottentot’ of Africa’s Cape, whose savagery was sometimes compared to the Aborigine, was acknowledged as ‘at least’ having some of the arts of civil life, including farming (Hudson 2004).

Take as symptomatic the description of Joseph Banks, when he speculated from his (east) Australian coastal vantage point, that because there was no cultivation along that coast, either the inland of the continent must be unpeopled or the coastal Aborigines must be akin to monkeys. In Banks’ (1768-1771, reprinted 1962) journal of his voyage on The Endeavour, he stated:

We saw indeed only the sea coast: what the immense tract of inland countrey may produce is to us totally unknown: we may have liberty to conjecture however that they are totally uninhabited. The Sea has I believe been universally found to be the chief source of supplys to Indians ignorant of the arts of cultivation: the wild produce of the Land alone seems scarce able to support them at all seasons, at least I do not remember to have read of any inland nation who did not cultivate the ground more or less, even the North Americans who were so well versd in hunting sowed their Maize. But should a people live inland who supported themselves by cultivation those inhabitants of the sea coast must certainly have learn’d to imitate them in some degree at least, otherwise their reason must be suppos’d to hold a rank little superior to that of monkies. (cited in Beaglehole 1962, pp. 122-3)

In Banks’ humanist Enlightenment world view, there was a real perplexity – not necessarily hostile – around the apparent contradiction in Australia of the presence of people, and the absence of cultivation. In the logic of the humanist binary of ‘in nature/out of nature’, the Aborigine sat awkwardly at its intersection, eliciting – so I have argued from a perspective that problematises the notion of human separation from nature – an intimate confusion for colonists about their own uncertain relation to the natural world.

The artist Thomas Watling (1794) is of interest in this respect for beginning an aesthetic tradition of juxtaposing figures of natives with embellished depictions of cultivation and settlement. As many historians have noted, not least Bernard Smith (1985) in his European Vision and the South Pacific, there was a perceived incongruity for colonists between Australia’s ‘untrodden’ state of nature, and that of imposed landscape order, with the Aboriginal standing in as the figure on the ‘edge’. What bears further historicisation, however, is the sense in which ‘Australia’ presented an awkward challenge to the Enlightenment idea that the human’s essential and universal ‘humanity’ lay in the transcendence of nature. For colonial settlers, Australia was no easily or seamlessly digested disturbance. On the uncomfortable ground of terra incognita, the settler was stripped of assurances about modes of livelihood, appearance and conduct appropriate to human being. And while most
British commentators of the late eighteenth century held to the Enlightenment idea, and faith, that Aboriginal people – as human and thus nature-altering beings – held the capacity to improve, even if they had not yet manifest it, in time this optimism began to fade. Even Barron Field (1825), NSW Supreme Court judge, who was among the earliest colonists to invoke brain size in debate over human differences, held to the faith that the Aboriginal would in time improve. However inferior and akin to dogs in intelligence, Field reflected, the Aboriginal was improvable.

A seed of doubt was sown however, and all the more so, into the early decades of the nineteenth century with the failure of numerous, more or less systematic efforts to settle and ‘improve’ Aboriginal people. Not only did they not (appear to) cultivate the land – and so separate themselves in this way from nature – they showed little interest in being induced into a state of settled cultivation with all its putative civilising potentialities. After a few decades of colonisation then, there was a further problem in the Enlightenment humanist paradigm that it is my concern in this lecture to unsettle by spotlighting some of its fragile moments. Here was a human who was apparently not moving progressively or gradually out of nature. Note the bafflement, even despairing tone of Secretary of the Colonial Office in London, Lord Stanley, in writing to Governor of NSW George Gipps in 1842:

. . . [I]t seems impossible any longer to deny that the efforts which have hitherto been made for the civilization of the aborigines have been unavailing; that no real progress has yet been effected, and that there is no reasonable ground to expect from them greater success in the future. You will be sensible with how much pain and reluctance I have come to this opinion . . . I cannot conceal from myself that the failure of the system of protectors has been at least as complete as that of the missions . . . [but will leave] the matter in your hands, because your whole correspondence shows that no one feels more strongly than yourself the duty as well as the policy of protecting, and if possible, civilizing these aborigines, and of promoting a good understanding between them and the white settlers . . . [I]t is . . . my hope that you can suggest some general plan by which we may acquit ourselves of the obligations which we owe towards this most helpless race of beings. I should not, without the most extreme reluctance, admit that nothing can be done; that with respect to them alone the doctrines of Christianity must be inoperative, and the advantages of civilization incommunicable. I cannot acquiesce in the theory that they are incapable of improvement, and that their extinction before the advance of the white settler is a necessity which it is impossible to control . . . I assure you that I shall be willing and anxious to cooperate with you in any arrangement for their civilization which may hold out a fair prospect of success (Colonial Office 1844, pp. 221-3).

I interpret this anguish of encounter at the limit of ‘the human’ as a kind of rupture – a crisis of humanism of such proportion that it precipitated speculation across the 1830s and 1840s, that the human category might be fragmented, not unified at all, that different humans might even constitute different species, or in the words of the book title of the English physician, John Knox (1850), separate ‘races of man’.

And, just as later in the century, not even Charles Darwin’s bold claims for continuity of human and ape could unseat the logic of human separation from nature (see Anderson, in press, chapter 6), innatism – far from jettisoning humanism – depended for its very logic on the idea of human distinction from nature. There is a slight complexity to the argument here: innatism did indeed relinquish the Enlightenment idea of human unity (in that it posited distinguishable categories of people), but the
idea of human separateness from nature persisted, smuggled into a fresh logic of innate human differences. That is, the world’s people could now be divided and ranked, not out of any abstract ‘othering’ impulse or rational defence of power (see below), but according to quite specific measures of the human transcendence of human animality and exterior nature. Foremost among the indices was the human skull – presumed to house the organ (of mind) with the potential to tame and discipline the human’s animal nature. Here, the science of craniology stepped in to elaborate this detailed ideological work, the strained intensity of which continued right through the Darwinian era and post-evolutionary ‘head-readings’ of the late 1800s (Figure 1). The doctrine of an essential ‘humanity’ became preserved in the claim that those who were so lagging in mental/cultural development – would die out as a people. And by that time, of the late nineteenth century, colonialism’s diverse projects in Australia had themselves hardened and grown genocidal.

If ever there was an instance of repressed anxiety over ‘our’ own ambiguous relationship to nature, including ‘our’ own human animality, it was in the thesis of innate and irreconcilable savagism. If ever there was a tragic impact to the artificial knowledge segmentation that turns the human into a being that is all the ‘more’ human as it transcends the non-human, it lay in the preposterous contrivance that the world’s people could actually be differentiated and calibrated on a scale of ‘distance’ from nature. If ever there was a cost to a narrow mindset that closes its ontological gates tightly around the domain of a falsely universalised human, it has been played out in the ‘clash of civilisations’ on the continent of Australia. The radicality and importance for Australian audiences (and beyond) of this intellectual manoeuvre should not be understated. The idea that the New World’s savages lived ‘closer to nature’ became innatism’s structuring logic – with the Australian – serving as the base reference point from which other races were in turn ‘read’. From the mid-nineteenth century, a logic of racial fixity and relativist comparison arose in Anglo-American and settler Australian thought around the very referentiality of the non-farming Australian Aborigine presumed to be stuck ‘at the limit of the human’.

**An affective historiography of race**

If the Aborigine was as intractable to European knowledge regimes as I am suggesting, it becomes difficult (as alluded to earlier) to entirely accept the claim that the Aboriginal was folded into Orientalist-style representations handed down by European modernity and imperialism. After Foucault and Said, there have been a number of influential claims by Australian historians and other cultural studies scholars that knowledge regimes about New World savages arose in conjunction with modernity and imperialism to assert a European self and regard (e.g. Ryan 1996). Bain Attwood (1992), for example, writes that colonial characterisations of Aboriginal people as ‘closer to nature’ became innatism’s structuring logic – with the Australian – serving as the base reference point from which other races were in turn ‘read’. From the mid-nineteenth century, a logic of racial fixity and relativist comparison arose in Anglo-American and settler Australian thought around the very referentiality of the non-farming Australian Aborigine presumed to be stuck ‘at the limit of the human’.

the category of the self became fashioned through the construction of an other which is outside and opposite . . . hence Europeans have forged their own collective identity through a discourse which sets them apart from non-Europeans, especially the Aborigines as the primordial or primitive other, the paradigm of antiquity. (Attwood 1992, p. iii)
In arguing that the Aborigine was the constitutive ‘outside’ of the European, Attwood and others persuasively did, it must be stated, usefully shift the explanation for the inferiorisation of Aboriginal people away from essentialist claims about natural prejudice between groups of people, toward the function of stereotypes in affirming in-group identity and power.

Still, I have thought for some time that this, and other similar critiques of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial stereotypes of indigenous people as extensions of Enlightenment othering that arose to justify imperial power – from the time of slavery under Spanish empires in the 1600s, through colonial dispossession and subordination of ‘New World’ people, and slavery in the US (see e.g. Morton 2002) – is to offer a
very overgeneral answer to the question of why innatism, as a specific mode of articulating difference and inferiority, arose in the first place. There can be no disputing the historical association that numerous critical scholars have charted, in many diverse ways, between the rise of racial discourse and the extension of European empires. What I offer to existing race historiographies is something strongly supplementary, not completely alternative, in preferring to take as my driving plot the fraught fate of humanism on the continent of Australia.

By emphasising the transformation of perplexity, shock, and confusion into the anxious rigidity of innatism by the late 1840s, I participate in what might be called a ‘post-constructivist’ historiography of race. The distinct and radical shift from a relatively benign idea of ‘tribe’ in the eighteenth century to innatism in the nineteenth century is not easily reduced, and certainly not rigorously explained, as the endless capacity of European power for mutation. Colonial stereotyping of ‘white’ and ‘non-white’ behavioural and bodily characteristics was not always a matter of Europeans asserting a secure and coherent sense of superiority, as a number of Australian postcolonial critics after Homi Bhabha’s (1994) work on anxiety have, in their own way using psycho-analytic tools, already argued (e.g. Gelder and Jacobs 1998). Pushing the line of unfaltering British domination is to feed the likes of Keith Windschuttle’s (2004) ever-more unsubtle reprimands of ‘leftist’ Australian historians, who he mischievously claims falsely compare Australia to apartheid states such as South Africa. Nor has the (sound) argument that New World indigenous people were defined as part of a process of European self-definition and will to power, left enough scope for a rigorous consideration of the impact of such people and their landscapes on the processes of knowledge production (metropolitan and settler). In point of fact, encounters with indigenous people in America and Australia had distinctly decisive impacts on European knowledge production, the differences between which get eclipsed in critiques of an aspatial, standardised savagery.

What I have wanted to evoke, then, are colonial grappling with Australia and the Australian. My focus has been the changing modes of conjecture and speculation that were fraught with awkward mixes of arrogance and anguish, fascination and fear, perplexity and confusion. Further to problematisations of the idea of human separation from nature, and also recent moves within Human Geography to allow peoples emotional and sentient responses to ‘breathe’ in academic discourse (e.g. Davidson and Milligan 2004), this affective state of arousal in colonial Australia around what it meant to be properly human, is one I locate ontologically in an intimate strife over ‘our’ own uncertain place in/out of nature.

**Conclusion**

The place of ‘the human’ in relation to nature, including human animality, remains today an intensely unresolved matter. This is all the more controversially so as advances in genetic and reproductive technologies fuse the likes of rabbit eggs with human cells, transplant pigs hearts into human bodies, make mice with human brains, etc., so eliciting what has always been a profound anxiety about the ‘boundary’ of the human. Human engagements with nature are after all highly complex. They can, at one and the same time, entail mastery and deference, cruelty and compassion, distance and proximity. Competing or antagonistic tendencies within the discourse of human uniqueness thrive precisely, I would argue, because of a failure to
determinately separate the human from nature. As Wolfe states, the (non-human) animal has always been ‘frightfully nearby, always lying in wait at the very heart of the constitutive disavowals and self-constructing narratives enacted by the fantasy figure called ‘the human’’ (Wolfe 2003, p. 6).

In this lecture, my concern has been to track the precariousness in the discourse of human distinction from nature for Enlightenment and colonial attitudes about Australia and ‘the Australian’. My task has been to elaborate a specific recontextualisation of what was, and remains, an extraordinary discourse of innate human difference, one whose anxious rendering by the 1840s as ‘race’ forces into more open recognition what I would suggest has been the uncertainty of the divide between the human and non-human worlds. As such, this recontextualisation shares a style of imagining an entangled world of living things in which are relaxed the lines marking off the human from the non-human; this with a view to envisioning new modes of relation to a range of heterogeneous ‘others’. For critical race and colonialism scholars, the project furthers from a fresh post-humanist direction the specialist interpretation of race’s historicity. What emerges is a portrait of that thoroughly fragile fiction, one constituted as much through specific encounters – especially with the Australian state of nature/native – as through an inherited system of us/them categorisation.

Australia’s Griffith Taylor was no stranger to the late nineteenth-century view that the Aborigine was a doomed race (see e.g. Taylor & Jardine 1924 and the prediction that ‘a generation hence there will hardly be any fullbloods remaining’, p. 269). As the idea of improvement/progress on the continent of Australia came to exclude Aboriginal people, their ‘dying out’ became understood as their questionable capacity to sustain themselves ‘as human’, that is, in humanist philosophy, as nature-transcending beings. Underlying the tragic fatalism of this evolutionary logic – that those people who did not transcend nature had no future and would be wiped out by the trajectory of civilisation – lay the anxious uncertainty of a settler people unreconciled to their own place in/out of nature. In the case of Australian nature, as stated earlier, colonists had always found the continental surface together with its distinctive fauna and flora challenging from the point of view of improvement/cultivation, and confounding to European classification schemes. Arguably, the crisis of Enlightenment humanism by the mid-1800s that has been my subject matter in this lecture was compounded on this continent by its variously unintelligible ‘states of nature’, human and non-human. In highlighting the enigmatic and anomalous – the intractably perplexing human of a strangely inverted land – I have tried to access that which cannot be appropriated to the world of the centred human subject; that which cannot be fitted into the human’s interpreted world; that is, to allow a ‘sharing’, as Glendinning (2000), p. 24) calls it, ‘without sharing in the same horizon’. Out of this openness to all manner of diversities might be crafted fresh lines of debate about modes of environmental belonging and becoming on this continent that overcome the stale binaries and blindspots of a population-environment debate that will not go away.
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