

Research Directions

Office of Research Services

Race, Nature and the Human

Professor Kay Anderson from the Centre for Cultural Research is undertaking research that helps Australia interpret its history to itself and the world. This ARC Discovery project aims to offer a new kind of critical account of Australia's occupation and fresh ways of talking about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal 'co-existence'.

Aboriginal people and their livelihoods challenged the modern European idea of the human as a fundamentally nature-altering being. Using historical texts that portray a range of New World people, and evolutionary accounts of Australia's 'early man', the project attempts to re-cast understandings of the rise and persistence of racial determinism across the 19th century. Rather than emphasise the assertion of power by British colonists, it assesses the mix of fascination and confusion toward people who deranged Enlightenment notions of 'the human' as a nature-transcending being. It argues that Aboriginal people could not be comprehended, according to the prevailing conception of racial difference, as a mere variety of the human. It thus pursues the argument that the idea of fixed human difference arose out of this incomprehension.

In particular, the study will explore further the idea of race. "The idea of 'race' has furnished some of the most pernicious and pervasive justifications of exploitation known to us" Professor Anderson points out, 'so it is crucial to understand how it came into being as an idea. It is especially important in Australia because the idea of race contributes much to public perceptions of social difference and the dynamics of institutions, laws, and everyday life'.

The project takes off from the idea that the human is not separate from nature but is thoroughly entangled with it – post humanism. In so doing 'the project intends to re-think the persistent tendencies of Australians to write Aboriginals into nature, and forces a novel revision in thought about what it means to be 'properly human', said Professor Anderson.

Project Title: *The Humanities Beyond Humanism: Race, nature and the Human in Australia from Enlightenment to Federation.*

Funding has been set at \$135,000.

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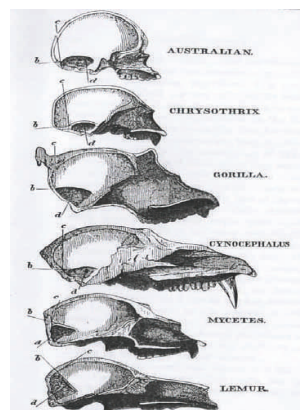


FIG. 17.—Sections of the skulls of Man and various Apes.
Thomas Huxley (1897) *Man's Place in Nature and Other Anthropological Essays*, p.109.