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White Natures: Sydney's Royal Agricultural Show in Post-Humanist Perspective

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Abstract

Few events perform so ritualistically the triumphal narrative of human ingenuity and agency over the natural world, as the metropolitan displays of produce and machinery known as agricultural shows. The Royal Agricultural Show held in Sydney (Australia) is a case in point. Since the 1890s those liminal forms, of Herefords, hay, harvesters and the like that spill over the categories we think of as culture and nature, have been annually assembled. In the showground, they were made to stand as testimony to the successful march of 'civilization' to the colony of New South Wales – with civilization conceived, in European and humanist terms, as a spatialized progression out of an animal-baseline in nature, through an agrarian garden, to the evolved space of the City. This was the trajectory that had long since been presumed to mark out the life of humanity from all other life-forms that *simply lived*. Rather than reinscribe the privilege of that partial perspective, I use the New South Wales agricultural society and its Sydney show's 'white natures' to think across the referential categories of humanity and nature. By critically juxtaposing the Show's hybrid things with its dramatizations of human invention and ingenuity, the article opens cracks in the normativities of civilization that shaped the conviction of 'the human' as the being who transcends the merely natural. In so doing, the article also offers a fresh line of critique of those pernicious hierarchies that have, and continue to assign, premodern people and livelihoods to an anterior developmental space.

Keywords: cultural geography, culture, nature, race, colonialism, civilization, Australia

Introduction

In a sense, this is an essay about farm animals and crops. In keeping with the imagery for which Australia's vast nonurban spaces are known, this article's cast of characters will be the sheep, shorthorns, stallions, shearing machines, Swedes and other liminal forms that sit in that borderland space between culture and nature, the human and the nonhuman. Such artefacts of nature's cultivation have been assembled from the 1890s to the present day at the annual display of agricultural produce known as Sydney's Royal Agricultural Society Show. This annual performance of the agricultural ideal through the proud props of cultivation – of livestock, crops, resources and machines – reiterated some foundational tropes of Australia's colonial mapping. Not least crucial were those of agriculture, property and the territoriality of settlement in a landscape which, as *terra nullius*, had apparently been devoid of any such 'improvements'. By today, over two centuries since British possession of the Great South Land, Aboriginal and environmental critiques of 'improved' land use highlight the fragilities

within the massive discursive structures of culture/nature, city/country, and settlement/wilderness that legitimized European claims to the semiarid continent.

Although it might be possible to develop a critique of Sydney's Royal Agricultural Show (and its many counterparts throughout the British Empire) as one of colonialism's quintessential representational spaces, that line of argument forms only part of the account that follows. My starting point is the observation that the genre of the agricultural show enacts in thoroughly ritualistic fashion a triumphal narrative of human ingenuity over the nonhuman world. In that sense, such spectacles owe as much of a debt to modernity as to colonialism, as much to the socio-technical practices through which European and European-derived societies ordered a relationship to the nonhuman world, as to the global extension of European imperial powers over subordinated peoples and places. After all, and historically speaking, the technologies of agriculture and pastoralism were by no means coincident with Europe's various imperializing extensions from the sixteenth century. Instead, they belong within a long heritage of European-derived discursive practices that underpinned Europe's Age of Discovery. These are stories of 'civilization' conceived as humanity's historical ascent *out* of nature; stories of the temporal process through which humanity strives to raise itself out of an animal state. Civilization in this sense is the realization of humanity as 'truly human', conceived as a movement away from mere living things that live. The focus of this article on the urban agricultural show is thus to position the spectacle within a critical analytic frame that enrolls, but also exceeds, anti-colonial critique of white nation-building in the New World.

Rethinking 'culture' for a post-humanist geography

Still to today, world historians typically see agriculture as the developmental threshold that provided the basis for the emergence of the great regional traditions of human civilization (e.g. Clark 1969; Smith 1995). Working with the parallel image of humanity's *biological* evolution, from ancestral pongid to anatomically modern human (Ingold 1995) – a narrative in which evolution gains a moral meaning as it slowly becomes imbued with 'consciousness' – such accounts envisage nature's cultivation as an evolutionary advance. Cultivation is scripted as the turning point that launched humanity on its diverse 'civilizing' paths. So, for Maisels (1990), for example, it was plant and animal domestication that enabled a succession of interrelated changes in the scale and complexity of human societies, and in the development and diversification of humanity across the surface of the earth.

Such a construal of agriculture's signal role also finds its way into influential strands of geographical writings. For Carl Sauer, writing from the 1920s in the American context, 'culture' was the name given to this evolutionary force behind the diverse imprints that groups of people left on the face of the earth. The richness of Sauer's work lay in his keen attention to the variable expressions of this influence in different regional contexts across the Americas and beyond. In his enquiries into the origins of agriculture, for example, Sauer (1952) argued that in Malaysia and India, certain animals were selected for domestication as gifts to spirits or for the purposes of ritual re-enactments of divine combat. More generally, in arguing the case that 'culture' more so than 'environment' shaped human landscapes, he wrote: 'Man alone ate of the fruit of the tree of Knowledge . . . and thereby began to acquire and transmit learning, or Culture' (1956, 52). The overriding point of his (uneasy) mix of cultural

evolutionism and cultural relativism – as taken up by numerous followers in the American Berkeley School of Cultural Geography (Thomas 1956) – was the instrumental role of culture as a ‘universal capacity’ of ‘even the most primitive people, including the obtuse Tasmanians’ (1952, 11) to effect particular landscape changes. Even they, it was to be granted, were human.

Bearing in mind the example of these ‘obtuse’ Australians – people who traditionally neither domesticated plants and animals, nor settled in nodes around them – one can begin to chip away at the blindspots in the civilizational discourses that have informed an ideology of humanity-nature separation, both in popular and scholarly (Anglo-American) thought. Indeed, the linking of cultivation and human potentiality, I shall argue, turns a spotlight on a most exclusionary politics. This applies in at least two senses, the excavation of which brings themes of contemporary geographic interest surrounding the culture/nature interface into fruitful contact with those of race and empire. The article’s focus, then, on a *colonial* agricultural society and show, in a space of white nationbuilding occupied by the premodern ‘savage’, is not incidental. To the contrary, it is fully integral to the task of undercutting the self-appointed authority of the foundational figure of civilized man [sic] and his universalist model of human development.

First, the coupling of nature’s cultivation with civilization lays bare a representational conceit within many of the world’s cultural traditions, including Western European, that the hand of a universalized human entails a *supercession* of (animal) nature. This is a view that, as noted earlier, has been reproduced within strands of the subdiscipline of Cultural Geography. There we find that evolutionary conceptions of culture inspired by the work of Sauer, but also more recent, symbolic conceptions after Clifford Geertz’s (1973) interventions, locate culture in a sealed, species-specific sphere of humanity. Despite radical epistemological differences between those two conceptions of culture (Duncan 1980), both work with an unexamined model of humanity as an essentialized condition and status. I refer here to the remarkably persistent presumption that there exists an essence of humanity that is opposed to, and which exists on a plane above, all that is nonhuman. That essence is the capacity for learning, or culture, understood either as a superorganic ‘thing’ passed on by human evolution in Sauerian geography, or as a signifying system of meanings and practices in more recent symbolic conceptions.

By now, such constructs of culture sit uncomfortably with the growing range of critiques of philosophical humanism that have taken apart the construal of ‘the human’ handed down by classical anthropology (Derrida 1987; Glendinning 1996, 1998; Pearson 1997 1999). Such critiques have in different ways deflated the humanist principle that what is distinctive about humankind, the *humanity* of humankind, is ultimately completely separate from the status and condition of animality, including human animality (otherwise called ‘biological man’, or more colloquially, ‘the beast within’ (Midgley 1978)). The tale in question here is one that assumes that man is man [sic], only in so far as he is essentially *more than* an animal, including a human animal. The humanity of the human is afforded a special status as something that is essentially more than that which obtains for other things *that simply live* (Glendinning 1998, 69). Such work does not seek to obfuscate the many differences between the capacities and experiences that characterize human beings and animals; rather to argue that the drawing of single or essential limits around

humanity and animality is itself what obscures specific differences *between* humans and animals as well as *among* humans themselves and animals, themselves. In that analytical manoeuvre, diverse ‘modes of being’ in the world are opened up to ‘contamination and multiplication’ (Calarco 2002, 23).

From a different theoretical direction are critics who have queried the human/animal divide in terms of its shifting and contradictory meanings over time and space. For example, the fragility and instability of ‘the human’ in its relations with its animal others has been amply demonstrated by scholars of the early modern period in Europe when the category of ‘the human’ had to constantly invoke for its existence contrasting border-figures according to context and circumstances (Ham and Senior 1997; Fudge *et al.* 1999). Other critics still, including in geography, have been explicitly driven in their efforts to unsettle the human/animal boundary by a sensibility geared to animal inclusiveness and animal rights (Emel and Wolch 1998; Philo and Wilbert 2000). They point to evidence increasingly brought to bear of the capacities for language, sentience, consciousness, sociability and intentionality of creatures additional to the human – capacities and states that have long since been the defining characteristics of human beings (e.g. Griffin 1992; Birke and Hubbard 1995; Masson and McCarthy 1996)¹. According to Tim Ingold (1994 1995), this evidence of capacities among nonhuman animals for agency – to some (variable) extent and in some (variable) form – not only questions the common assumption that animals form a homogeneous set which must be absolutely distinguished from human beings. It also challenges the conventional characterization of animal behaviour *only* in terms of nature, instinct, biology and stasis.

In combination, these scholarly interventions at the human/animal border suggest that more than an ‘animal turn’ might be at stake in a critique of the humanist anthropology that lies at the heart of a certain way of thinking about humanity as the embodiment of a ‘civilizational’ essence – an essence that is linked to the self-constitution of the human species. I have been suggesting that this model of ‘the human’ can be subjected to further scrutiny by those of us concerned to think culture beyond humanism².

The second sense in which the linking of cultivation and human potentiality is problematic turns on the image in Western tradition of the Earth as Garden. This tale privileges a teleological course of agrarian land use and livelihood – one that carries

¹ In this respect there are also many ‘bald naturalists’ who deny a fundamental cleavage between human and nonhuman forms of life – who are quick, that is, to claim that humans are ultimately organisms whose behaviour, like animals, is subject to natural laws of the kind studied in other sciences. See Glendinning’s (2000) effort to drive a path through this mode of what he calls ‘bald naturalism’ and, at the other extreme of efforts to ‘fit the animal in’ to philosophical thought, humanism, with its presumption that subjectivity is a non-natural and uniquely human possession, and that we must give a completely different account of the behaviour of human beings than we give for other nonhuman species (2000, 21).

² Many cultural geographers would today see their own work as post-humanist, in the sense of a concern with the decentred forms of human identity rather than (as in this paper) the human/nature distinction. This paper is not critical of the interest in identity within cultural geography – indeed this issue in relation to ‘the human’ is central to the article. But it does raise (without resolving here) two questions that need more sustained attention as follows: (a) what the sub-discipline would be like were the human subject and subjectivity not so centred, in relation to the nonhuman and (b) how we might conceptualize culture beyond a narrowly conceived social field – a field that, in the words of Philo and Wilbert ‘closes its gates tightly around “the human”’ (2000, 28). See also Davies (1997) for a history of the wide range of meanings of the term humanism.

not only a heavy humanist baggage, but an ethnocentric one as well. In this narrative, the movement of history is the march of humanity, which has its ultimate manifestation in the secure enclosure of the City, where the expanse of nature ends or is 'brought in' in proudly domesticated forms (Rundell and Mennell 1998; Beilin 1999). Greek writings on husbandry for example, perhaps especially such agricultural manuals as Virgil's *Bucolics* and *Georgics* (see Thirsk 1984) suggest that the human, in transforming the nonhuman world with the arts of animal and plant domestication, was history's defining agent. Denis Cosgrove's (1993) work on the temporal narratives informing Greek mythic geographies is helpful here³. According to the ancient philosophers that Cosgrove reviews, human civilization had – in selectively breeding select animals, tending flocks of them, cultivating the earth and more generally transforming the wilderness into the landscapes of 'garden' and ultimately City – ascended out of a state of nature⁴. It is in the City where people, in entering into distinctively *non-natural* relations (political, legal etc.) realize their full humanity among a set of relations that are absent in the *wholly natural* lives of other living things⁵. Man – as mind – frees himself [sic] from the primal struggle identified with animality and in which the Animal would forever remain lodged.

This intellectual tale was a key narrative projection that underpinned and justified the diverse European extensions into North America, Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand from the seventeenth century. In the case of Australia, the constitutive spatialities within that progression – of improvement, property and settlement – were ones through which Aboriginal non-cultivators were dispossessed from parts of the continent which, as 'wastelands', were not in 'production' nor even remotely on the path to humanity's proper dwelling space in the city.

These twin conceits – of (a) humanity as a civilizational essence that is (b) realized in a stadial movement from hunter-gatherer, through farmer, to city-dweller – afford an opportunity for the cultural geographer to engage in useful analytical bridgework across the spheres of the human and nonhuman worlds. Crucially, this is a move that requires more than an excavation into the history of *ideas* – in this case, eurocentric representations of humanity and animality, as well as of different peoples and places. This style of discourse analysis is the still useful, though increasingly exhausted tactic of much recent deconstructive work in critical cultural geography – a strategy that works to destabilize the power-differentiated effects of language and meaning. For in this case, a questioning of the figure of the 'civilized' human in Western discourse

³ It bears stating that during the late fifteenth century, classical works became accessible throughout Europe in Latin translation. It was then that, in Britain, such writings exerted their impact on estate management (Overton 1996).

⁴ See Glendinning (2000) for an alternative story of 'man's heading', that is, of man on the move, no longer figured as being uniquely moving toward some anticipated proper end via the polis. Thinking of man as nomad, as migrant and wanderer, as constantly home and away, is the tale, recognizable in much contemporary cultural geography of travel that works away from a sedentarist metaphysics.

⁵ Of course, a more textured account than is possible in an article would note the changes and even inversions of this normative characterization of humanity's trajectory. For example, to the extent that the mythical landscapes of the 'wild' and the 'city' each possessed their archetypal 'other sides' (the wild as pristine and pure, the city as dark and evil), their meanings must be understood as internally contradictory and historically contingent. During England's industrial revolution, it is well known that the city became identified with the forces of darkness and evil, with the countryside subject to more romantic renderings (see Robson 1994). These negative characterizations of city life coexist (uneasily) to this day with those classical notions of cities as monuments to civilization. Perhaps these more celebratory construals of the city are buried in the (sometimes uncritical) yearnings about 'cosmopolitanism' in today's urban theory on global cities.

forces not only a narrative, but an ontological recognition of the co-presence of all the other living things to which the idealized human has long since been opposed. It compels us to acknowledge ontologically the vitalism and materiality of nonhuman entities (Whatmore 2002), not least of the long devalued and sentient animal (Wolch 2002). Consistent, too, with the widely read ideas of amodern theorists such as Bruno Latour (1993), the interrogation of civilizational discourse facilitates an acknowledgement of the ‘impurity’ of culture/nature spheres – of culture as itself a product of other entities he calls ‘hybrids’.

The approach through which can be conceived a select agricultural show in colonial New South Wales points well beyond itself, then, to the challenge of ‘thinking’ culture beyond both humanism and the ethnocentric exclusivities that lie buried within its persistent classical heritage. In contrast to cultural geographies of ‘human impact on the earth’ that either celebrate or lament technological changes to the environment (e.g. Wagner and Mikesell 1962; Turner 1991; Rubenstein 2001; Sluyter 2001), or those accounts that privilege the ontological properties of people as ‘meaning-making’ and ‘world-altering’ beings who socially construct nature (see especially Wilson 1992), an alternative writing tactic seeks to unseat the pivotal figure of the human who – however anxiously – has pinned so much of his defining status on the capacity to turn ‘nature’ into ‘culture’. And far from being universal and unmarked, the historically situated bodies of this idealized human were profoundly raced, as can be seen through this article’s window on ‘white natures’ in colonial Sydney.

Discourses of ‘the human’: rethinking colonial racism from Australia

At this nexus lie frontiers to push back in understanding the discursive sources of white racism toward premodern people during British imperial expansion from the seventeenth century. As many distinguished historians have already argued, the imperial extension of Britain overseas relied on a more complex entanglement of knowledges than perceived ‘racial’ and religious difference (e.g. Pagden 1982 1995; Pearce 1988; Adas 1989; Armitage 2000; Drayton 2000). These writers have, in divergent ways, invoked additional ideas of savagery dating back to classical times, hierarchies of technological worth, ideologies of state-formation within Britain in the early-modern era, and enlightenment notions of nature’s improvement. It is possible, however, to extend in critical ways these contributions to understanding the ideological taproots of empire, by bringing the study of European civilizational discourse into contact with the post-humanist criticism mentioned earlier. Such criticism, to recap, works against the idealizing and distorted tendency to conceive of humanity by way of essential contrast to a condition and status of animality. It also refutes the claim that this essentialized humanity is ‘headed’ on a developmental path that has the savage condition of animality as its departure point (see notes 4 and 5). The ontological manoeuvre at stake here opens out an augmented theorization of Britain’s ‘civilizing mission’ in the savage spaces and societies of the New World – the theme of this paper’s later engagement with a select agricultural society and performance in one of the Australian colonies.

The de-humanization of indigenous people at the hands of European colonizers in Africa, America, Australia, Canada, and elsewhere, is well known and by now thoroughly documented (e.g. Pagden 1982; Goldie 1989; Deloria 1998). My interest is

not in rehearsing those anti-colonial critiques of the treatment of indigenous people as ‘less than human’ or ‘like animals’. I note with interest, but do not wish to repeat, the important contributions of those who have recalled the set of characterizations of ‘barbaric’ and ‘civilized’ places and people that travelled from ancient texts, through enlightenment perspectives on difference, and into modern systems of racialized knowledge about the indigenous people of Africa, America, Canada, Australia (Meek 1976; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Jahoda 1999). Rather, my broad interest is in moving us further along the path of historicizing the semiotic field in which, from the mid-nineteenth century in particular, human beings’ physical and behavioural variety became the basis of hierarchical ranking, using the specific case of encounters between British and Aboriginal people in Australia. Rather than fold modern racial ideology into the ‘othering’ discourses of enlightenment/colonialist thought (e.g. Attwood 1992; Ryan 1996; Hannaford 1996; Eze 1997), I wish to discern a specific link between racial thought about New World savages and a mid-nineteenth century crisis in the discourse of ‘human exceptionalism’. In so doing, it is possible to historicize the substantive focus of this paper – on an Australian colony’s agricultural society and show – in an intellectual context that exceeds colonialism.

The mid-nineteenth concept of biological race as an innate property of discrete human groupings has been extensively studied by scholars of anthropology and the history of science (see especially, Stocking 1968; Stepan 1982). Explanations for the shift from enlightenment explanations of primitivism to more rigid biological ones during the nineteenth century, are, however, surprisingly elusive. In recent critical historiographies of race and racism and postcolonial treatments following Said (1978), the burden of explanation is made to lie – after Foucault’s work on ‘dividing practices’ and the oppositional structure of colonial discourse – in the broad context of a power differentiation under colonialism. More specifically, this line of argument invokes the will on the part of the European ‘self’ to hegemony and possession over its negated or denigrated ‘others’ (e.g. Spurr 1993; Young 1995). There is more, however, to be said about this shift, and more specificity to be given to it.

This article has been interested so far in the intellectual tradition that has attributed to humans a distinctive (exceptional) nature-altering capacity. It is important to be clear that the focus is not human-centredness *per se* – the target of much animal rights-inspired work, and, quite differently, much work on nature’s classification, cultivation and other modes of ordering under colonialism. The specific focus is instead the assumed separation in Western thought of ‘the human’, which, I am arguing, does itself need problematizing. This ontological manoeuvre also includes a need to recognize the anxiety that has attended that fragile ‘split in consciousness’ between the human and nonhuman, humanity and animality.

The encounter of British colonists with the Aboriginal savage lent an acute fragility to this cherished claim of human separation, staked as it was around the premise of human uniqueness among all life-forms. To greatly condense and simplify things⁶, one witnesses from the late 1700s in the Australian case a largely optimistic enlightenment sense of the capacity of these ‘children of nature’ for ‘improveability’ (even if it had not yet manifested itself) along the path of progress of a universalized

⁶ In preparation is a manuscript by the author containing a more comprehensive coverage and titled ‘Culture, nature, colonialism: rethinking “race” from Australia’. See also Anderson (2001).

humanity (Mulvaney 1957; McGregor 1997; Gascoigne 2002). Consistent with enlightenment scholars such as Rousseau, this was a humanity ultimately united by its distinction and departure from the nonhuman world, yet also divided along lines of kin, tribe and nation. It was consistent, too, with the Christian premise of a humanity unified before God – the monogenist belief in the common stock of Adam and Eve from which the whole human race was said to derive. Explanations of primitivism at this time of the eighteenth century were largely the inhibiting factors of climate and environment, rather than innate differences and statuses. The human distinction itself was not in question because it was considered to consist in man’s capacity for improvement (Meek 1976, 163).

By the mid-nineteenth century, by which time the Aborigine had come to figure prominently in European and American scientific discourse on cultural/racial diversity (Stocking 1968; Douglas 2001), faith in human exceptionalism was straining. It had already been rendered insecure by the encounter in America with the Indian (Pearce 1988) and the discovery of the vast temporal development of the earth by 1840, which disturbed the Christian claim to a mosaic timescale (Rudwick 1996). The Aborigine increasingly came to elicit a precariousness in the very idea of ‘the human’ as separate from nature. Indeed, it is in this context of anxiety about what it was to be ‘human’ that the Aborigine became the characteristic figure of scientific claims from the 1850s in Europe and America for the *disunity* of mankind – a doctrine called ‘polygenism’ and referring to the idea that humans were split into ultimately separate, permanently fixed, and biologically innate ‘races’ (see also Thomas 1983, 136). The Aborigine was, so it was claimed by numerous European observers around this time, to be *even more* rude, miserable, vulgar than the African Hottentot. Unlike the crop-raising indigenes of America and New Zealand, he lacked crops, herds, property, gardens and all the ceremonial props of ‘settlement’ (Seed 1995). He lacked ‘learning’, in the narrow sense of the art of domesticating wild life-forms, and in the broad sense of regulating the interiorized ‘beast’ within human nature itself.

While these nineteenth-century perceptions of what it meant to be properly human were evident at earlier time periods in the colonial encounter in Australia – certainly they were present in Dampier’s accounts in the 1600s and Cook’s diaries in the 1770s (Douglas 2001) – and in this sense imply a *continuity* with earlier enlightenment ideas, by the mid-nineteenth century there was more at stake than the placement of the Aborigine on a pre-defined European scale of civilization and worth. Instead, and in point of fact, he had become *constitutive* of that scale. He was the ground-zero of the human, sitting at its extreme and limit. By the 1860s, with the science of craniometry/phrenology well under way, the majority of colonists were convinced of Aboriginal *un-improveability* based on some (assumed) innate/biological deficiency (Gascoigne 2002, chap. 8).

In this (greatly abbreviated) sense, I am suggesting there is a more complex story in the transition from the enlightenment idea of race-as-nation/ tribe to that of race-as-a-biological category, than the familiar tale of colonial othering. That existing account – which attributes racial discourse and its hardening in the nineteenth century to the legitimizing needs of a colonial oppressor – needs also to acknowledge the role of an anxiety that has run through the tale of ‘the human’ defined in terms of a civilizing capacity. (Arguably this sense of ambiguity at the human/nonhuman border persists to the present day.) In the New World this intellectual tale had to confront savagery in

the bodies of many indigenous people, and in the figure of the Australian Aborigine, who defied most efforts to civilize him [sic] over the 1800s, it came face to face with its own counter-example. Come the writings of Darwin, by the 1860s and 1870s, the only way in which the claim for human continuity with the apes could be reconciled with the doctrine of human exceptionalism, was to invoke the idea – prefigured in the classical anthropology of humanity’s progressive ascent out of nature – that anatomically modern man had evolved over the long *durée* from an ‘early’ incarnation to civilized man. And here again, as we find in the writings of the so-called cultural evolutionists of the late nineteenth century (e.g. Lubbock 1870; Morgan 1877; Tylor 1894), it was the Australian Aborigine who became the archetypal ‘early man’. Aborigines were exemplars par excellence in Hiatt’s words (1996, xii) of ‘beginnings and early human forms’ whose study was to set in train a celebrated tradition within British social anthropology. Put simply, the living Tasmanian savage was for Tylor (1894, 147) an ‘animate fossil’.

This observation might be of no slight significance in sharpening our understanding of the progressive rigidity of biological explanations of human variety and status (called race) from the mid-nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century. Indeed, if the Australian savage became scripted by cultural evolutionists as the ‘missing link’ between man and beast, this was not only due to the power in the nineteenth century of racist views of Aborigines as ‘mere animals’ – a move that has already been roundly condemned, and for good reason, by anti-racists and anti-colonial critics (Gossett 1965; Jordan 1968; Fredrickson 1981). The figuration of ‘early man’, embodied in the Australian savage, was also a manoeuvre that sought to resolve a post-Darwinian crisis in the premise of human uniqueness and separation from the nonhuman world. Colonial understandings of indigenous people took (at least some of) their racial inflection, then, I am arguing, from this anxious reassertion of a humanity/nature divide in the nineteenth century.

I have wandered far from the stated focus of this article on a colonial agricultural society and show, not to mention the figures of the farm animals and crops in the opening sentence. But it has been important to establish the historicity of the narrative device through which ‘the human’ became credited in Western thought with a uniquely distinctive capacity for civilizing the nonhuman world. I have argued this came through a specific and idealized contrast with an essentialized animality (including human animality) conceived as the bedrock underpinning, and thought to exist quite separately from, all that was presumed to make humans *human* (see Wade 2002, from a different direction). That this contrast has been accompanied by a generalized anxiety and ambiguity is also to be noted. A major purpose of this article is thus clarified: to trouble the influential, though persistently fragile, model of ‘the human’ in the civilizational discourse of the spaces and bodies that became identified with Europe. In so doing a fresh line of post-humanist critique of the concept of culture, the genealogy of race, and the pernicious colonial hierarchies that assigned premodern people to an anterior developmental space, is opened up.

The Sydney agricultural show beyond its text

The Royal Agricultural Show in Sydney, Australia, has been an annual event bringing together country and city since the 1890s, though the first parade of primary industry products was exhibited at Parramatta in 1822. A thoroughly colonial event, the show

drew its credibility and prestige from displaying the fruits of British ‘settlement’ from the 1780s. More than this, however, the show was a key event through which a European-derived discourse of civilization was constituted and performed in the artefacts of nature’s improvement. As stated earlier, civilizational discourse was by no means coincident with the overseas extension of the British empire. Instead, it drew upon an older and broader ideology of culture–nature separation at the heart of humanist myths of human exceptionalism and agency. In this sense, this cultivated space of white nation-building in the colony of New South Wales holds up a mirror to the *contingent* enactment of the cultivation ideal itself, most obviously abroad in Britain’s settler colonies where it was *contested*, but also at ‘home’ in the land of green pastures itself.

My strategy for clarifying this argument involves more than situating the Sydney show’s displays in a space of cultural representation. A now familiar strategy among cultural geographers might be to critically read the show’s exhibits (of Herefords, honey, harvesters and so on) as ‘texts’ – as marked alterities of a privileged gaze (colonial and human). Such an approach is not wholly compatible, however, with the analytical and ethical platform underpinning this article. This is to effect a more tactile sense of these liminal forms of human/nature entanglement, within a critique of the narrative of ‘civilization’ they do more than ‘re-present’. So in what follows I use the tools of post-humanist critique to interrupt the linear presumptions of civilizational discourse. The writing tactic is one that evokes, through juxtaposition, the vital properties of the domesticated natures that in their very constitution enfold a set of contingent relations among human and nonhuman. Their ‘materials’, I wish to convey, are enrolled by, but do themselves exceed, the civilizational pretensions of the ‘white natures’ on display.

Here the interest of this article can usefully be conjoined with scholars attempting to think through the hybrid ‘thinginess’ of ‘things’ (e.g. Bingham 1996; Hetherington 1999). In that work, we find an interest in objects beyond their textualization, in probing how objects are made, what is done with them, by whom and how, that to which they give passage, hold and mediate. Together with other forms of criticism of the place of ‘the human’ in human geography (e.g. Whatmore 2002), and advances in medical, reproductive, genetic and information technologies that are calling into question the meaning of human nature and the integrity of the human body (e.g. Gray 2001; Fukuyama 2002) – these works impart a more relational ontology of presence in the world than those for whom the world is a series of texts intelligible by human cognition (Thrift 2000). Following, too, the writings of material culture theorists, a more subtle engagement with the physicality of things is possible (Miller 1998). It follows, then, that I will be registering the palpable presences, as well as iconic power, of the exhibits assembled for Sydney’s agricultural show. The critical interest is not only in the ‘staging’ of the white civilizational ideal abroad, but in activating our imagining beyond stories of (white, civilized) man’s invention. This lies in arousing ‘a nonappropriating openness’ (Glendinning 2000, 23) to the vital presences of nonhuman subjects, and also to ‘other’ peoples’ models of relation to the nonhuman world (such as existed in pre-contact Australia and which continue to define the modes of subsistence of some Aboriginal people in Australia today).

Before turning to an account of the Sydney event, some historical context will be provided of the show’s sponsor, the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales.

To this day, it is an organization committed to settling, enclosing, organizing and converting the land, as if the land of the Australian continent were an external surface on which ‘the hand of man’ did its moral and practical work.

The Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales: on planting the ‘idle acres’

Behind the annual event that is the subject matter of this article was a society whose history stretches back into the founding years of the colony of New South Wales (NSW). Following the example of Tasmania, the idea of such a society travelled to the Australian mainland in the late 1810s (Mant 1972). At that time, the penal colony of NSW was home to an unknown number of indigenous people, approximately 30,000 British immigrants, over half of whom were (or had been) convicts, hundreds of thousands of head of sheep and cattle, plus numerous species of indigenous fauna and flora. Land grants had selectively been made available, and each year saw additional ex-convicts and immigrants begin private farming and grazing on the Cumberland Plain. In the process, those visitors – whose whiteness⁷ assumed an unspoken privilege as part of a violent territoriality of settlement – became ‘hosts’.

By the late 1810s, Commissioner J. T. Bigge, sent by the British government to report on conditions in New South Wales, was moved to praise the advanced state of farming and grazing on the leading properties of the colony (Fletcher 1988). Eight estates were, it was stated by Bigge ‘in the best state of cultivation’ with herds and flocks ‘in which the greatest improvement has been made’ (cited in Fletcher 1988, 15). As publicity was given to the prospects of making money from pastoralism, free immigrants were drawn to the colony. Many had already witnessed or been associated with the establishment of cattle shows, wool fairs and ploughing matches that had become commonplace in Britain from the mid-eighteenth century (WHC 1909; Hudson 1972). When, in 1821, Sir Thomas Brisbane, member of a landed Scottish family, took over as the colony’s Governor, support for an agricultural society gathered strength.

In the following year, 1822, agreement was reached on the formation of a society whose objectives embraced ‘the encouragement of production from the soil, the introduction from other lands of animals, plants, and seeds, and the carrying on of experimental farming’ (cited in Somer 1919, 7). The society was to be run by a committee comprising a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and members drawn from the major farming districts of the County of Cumberland, plus corresponding members from the Hunter River area. The elected office-bearers were all leading male citizenry. Class, gender, property and cultivation certainly conjoined in the election of Sir John Jamison (of Ireland) as first president, Judge Barron Field, the Reverend Samuel Marsden, William Cox, Dr Robert Townson and other prominent pastoralists. No ex-convict settlers, or women of any class, were represented in the long list of office-holders whose cultural and economic capital was invested in the cultivation ideal.

⁷ Here it is important to acknowledge the growing interest among geographers and others in the study of whiteness as a racialized position and field of aspiration. See, for example, Dyer (1997), and in geography, Bonnett (1997), Jackson (1998) and Kobayashi and Peake (2000). I take their claim that whiteness is an unmarked racialized position as a point of departure for the paper, and undertake an exploration of the discourses (of ‘the human’ and civilization) through which whiteness acquired some of its normativity.

Few organizations were as intimately implicated in effecting the extension of white selves and surfaces abroad as the agricultural societies of the Australian colonies (Wadham 1967; Davidson 1981). In enacting the ideal of settled cultivation through practices invoking property rights, other, more nomadic modes of relation to land were discredited and eradicated (Whatmore 2002, chap 4; see also Blomley 2002). The legacy of ideas of ‘property’ endures today in the legal distinction that was drawn in 1992 between the farmers of Torres Strait Island (whose claims were recognized in the Mabo judgement on native title) and the more nomadic livelihoods of many of the mainland’s Aboriginal groups. Back in the 1820s, the anniversary address by President Barron Field provides perhaps the clearest statement of purpose behind the establishment of the New South Wales agricultural society. According to the public spirit of agricultural improvement, Aboriginal people, in roaming rather than reaping the land, had yet to realize their full human potential (as civilizing agents). The Supreme Court judge and keen zoologist, told the assembled members:

To us is given by providence, with the nation to which we belong, the high honour to civilise this new world, and to give our Religion, our Laws, our Language, and all the civil blessings we enjoy to this rude uncultivated wilderness. . . . There is no Eden in Nature; all is from the industry of man. We must do what all nations have done before us . . . collect from every quarter what is adapted to our soil and climate. We must new clothe our adopted country; we must hew down the useless gum trees and plant the more useful fruit trees of Europe; and in lieu of the present thin herbage, give to our meadows the rich pasture of Britain. (First anniversary address 1822).

Few pronouncements could be more richly resonant of imperial purpose and pride. As a number of critiques of British encounters with Australia have already argued, colonists perceived and transformed the continent’s landscapes in accordance with British landscape ideals and the economic imperatives of empire (Heathcote 1965 1987; Powell 1972; Williams, 1974; Meinig 1988). One recurring theme of those critiques has been to argue that the transfer of land use practices was frustrated in many parts of the semi-arid continent, preventing the expected transition from extensive herding to intensive agriculture. Many scholars, too, have already drawn critical attention to Britain’s characterization of the Great South Land as *terra nullius* (e.g. Carter 1987; Lines 1991; Ryan 1996; Head 2000). This notion of Australia as ‘no mans land’ reiterated John Locke’s argument in the American case (itself a variant of the Roman law argument known as *res nullius*) that all ‘empty things’ including unoccupied lands remain the common property of all people until they are put to some, generally agricultural, use. The first person to use the land in this way becomes its owner who makes good his [sic] rights of possession by ‘improving’ the land, or in Locke’s words ‘mixing his labour with it’ (for a review see, Pagden 1995, chap 3). Such scholars have observed that this notion of improving wasteland was the defence British colonists mounted for occupying land in North America, and later on in Australia, without the consent of indigenous people (Drayton 2000).

The cultivation ideal commands further scrutiny, however, beyond an acknowledgement of its tenuous transfer to harsh physical environments (Griffiths and Robin 1997). Even its historical identification with the imperatives of empire, including the much-studied modes of classifying, ordering and mastering nature under colonialism (e.g. Miller and Reill 1996; Gascoigne 1998), obscures a more complex ancestry and constitutive power. The colonial concept of Australia’s ‘idle acres’ also drew on notions of perfectibility that called up a humanist philosophical legacy. Such

ideas of perfectibility, and related ones in Locke's writings, of improvement, resided in the civilizational doctrine that the destiny of humanity would be realized through a developmental course of agency over the inert world of objects in nature. As argued earlier, this doctrine lay at the heart of a cherished – albeit anxious – 'split' in euro-thought between the worlds of humanity and nature, the problematization of which opens out a broader analytic for theorizing white settlement and Aboriginal dispossession beyond instrumental appeals to white imperial supremacy.

In 1824, acting president of the New South Wales society, Reverend Samuel Marsden, more explicitly still drew the normative association between landed enterprise and 'improvement'. He stated in his annual address that, in addition to civilizing the penal colony, the

agricultural establishment may be regarded as an asylum where the guilty may forget their shame. . . . Who can travel through the colony, and view the extensive tracts of land cleared by the hired Government gangs and not feel equally impressed by the great and substantial gains in the general appearance of the country. (Second anniversary address 1824)

It was Jamison, however, with his enthusiasm for landed pursuits and the 'practical science' which farming came to be called, who most actively promoted the society's interests in its early decades (see Fletcher 1988, chap 1). Much of his own land, covering many thousands of hectares, was fenced, pastured and grazed. In land on the Nepean River that he leased, he inserted so-called improvement clauses. He imported breeds of horses from England, ran cattle that were progeny of Durham bulls, and produced Saxon as well as Merino wool. Many hectares at his Regentville estate near Penrith were set aside for crops which he rotated. He manured the soil, ploughed it deeply with horse-drawn implements, and pioneered the use of a steam-driven pump to irrigate his land. A leading viticulturalist, Jamison produced wine and was well-known for his cheese, which he proudly likened to English Cheshire. More generally, such activities anchored an ontology of settled cultivation in previously 'idle' space, the occupation of which by self-appointed hosts proceeded apace across the 1800s. According to the public spirit of agricultural improvement, Aboriginal people, in roaming rather than reaping the land, had yet to convert its potential.

Government-run fairs and markets were held throughout the colony before the establishment of the society in 1822. One, in the 1810s, at Parramatta, was centrally situated between the pasturelands of Windsor, Nepean, Richmond and Castlereagh, and the consumers of Sydney. That fair was confined to a single day, and the exhibits were limited in both number and range. But the objective, to 'excite in producers an ambition to excel each other' (cited in Anniversary address 1828, 27) foreshadowed the connection between improvement and competition that was to become the rationale for Sydney's agricultural show from the 1890s. The list of prizes revealed which fields of enterprise the society was keen to encourage. The first list, issued in September 1823, concentrated on locally bred livestock, particularly sheep. In addition to awards for, for example, the owners of the best 'two-toothed merino rams and ewes', inducements were offered to shepherds who weaned the largest number of lambs. In time, the prize list expanded considerably beyond livestock to include wine, beer, sherry, tobacco, cheese, cotton, silk and teams of draught animals. Awards were given, too, for learned papers on modes of farming operations, with a view to raising standards of farming throughout the colony.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the society's exhibition function faded, but district and specialist agricultural societies continued to form across the colony. By the 1860s, there was renewed interest and impetus for agricultural displays in towns and cities, and in Sydney the government set aside a permanent showground at Sydney's Prince Alfred Park. Come May 1869, an inaugural Metropolitan Inter-colonial Exhibition was held there with exhibits of products from the Australian colonies, as well as Canada, New Zealand and the United States. The following year another intercolonial exhibition of agricultural products, including wool, hemp, cotton and silk products from other British colonies, was held as part of the centenary celebrations of Cook's 'discovery' of the east coast of Australia.

The Royal Agricultural Show, 1891–1935: enacting the narrative triumph of settled cultivation

The Agricultural Society of NSW undertook a range of functions, including managing the affairs of the colony's breed societies, registering studs, checking pedigrees and compiling stud and herd books for the purpose of ensuring purity of stock in beef and dairy cattle, sheep, horses, pigs, poultry and goats (Mant 1972). It controlled the registration of cats and dogs, and affairs associated with the breeding of poultry, pigeons and cage birds. It also offered scholarships for junior farmers taking up agricultural science and provided the connecting link between the government's Department of Agriculture and local associations scattered throughout the country. In 1891, Queen Victoria granted permission for the prefix 'Royal' to be added to the society name to mark its leading contribution to the 'development and improvement of the colony, its exports and all branches of colonial industry allied to agriculture' (cited in Somer 1919, 8).

By this time of the late nineteenth century, when, as sketched earlier, the idea of 'the human' as a unique nature-altering being had become insinuated into racialized understandings of humanity's cultural evolution, the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales was in its heyday. The key promotional strategy of the society had become the holding of competitive shows⁸. Sydney became the 'convincing ground of all competition', to which local societies and the government experimental farms forwarded their best products (the 'cream of the country' according to the *Australian Star* 29 March 1899). As was the case in other emblematic spaces of civilization, including London with its fancier's clubs, botanical and zoological gardens and agricultural shows (Secord 1981), there seemed to be a special enthusiasm in the city for domesticated natures – both the enclosures of wild nature and activities that celebrated breeding achievements.

In the words of society president, member of parliament and premier-elect of the state Sir John See, when opening the 1898 show:

The exhibition, in focussing local competition, is an object lesson which enables the people of Sydney to see for themselves the true capabilities of NSW. These

⁸ The data for this account of the Show is drawn from the following primary sources, all held at the Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales archives in Sydney: the early (1820s) anniversary addresses of the society; The Royal Agricultural Society (hereafter RAS) Annual, 1906–26 (when it ceased publication); the RAS Newspaper Clipping Books, Book 1, 1890–9 and Book 2, 1899–1901 (when cutting service ceases) to be resumed again in the unnumbered clipping books for 1935–7. Secondary source material cited that relates to the society and its show are also held in the archive library.

shows are a marvellous incentive to producers in the country, who are brought into contact with the arbiters of taste and progress, prize givers and all concerned with the material development of the colony since its beginnings (*Elector*, 27 January 1898).

Such was the rhetoric of the colony's settlement history turned into a moral success story, as measured by 'outputs' from the soil.

Providing the conditions for competition was designed not only to increase resource production for the colony and British market. Competition also promoted (and drew upon) the premise of cultivation as a basic building block of human progress. In 1909, the RAS Annual stated: 'The Show shows us by ocular demonstration what great things the pastoralist and farmer are doing for the advancement of the entire human race' (Wharton 1909, 74). Some years later, a similar statement appeared in a local regional newspaper. 'The show reminds us never to be satisfied with what we have done', a *Newcastle Star* editorial stated in 1906 (8 April 1906): 'Leaving things to Nature will result in the roses reverting to the briar and the juiciest apples going back to the primitive state of the wild crab apple'. Perfecting the raw material of nature was the key to an apparently loftier destiny still, of propelling the human race, in teleological terms, from potentiality to actuality. Failure to fulfil this destiny was to risk a degenerative lapse – as if, in the words of Deleuze and Gattari's (1994) critique of the anthropocentrism of 'origins', 'beneath civilization we would rediscover, in terms of resemblance, the persistence of a bestial and primitive humanity' (cited in Pearson 1999, 180).

What was, in effect, then, the estrangement of civilized man [sic] from the nonhuman world, was read in terms of an idealized model of human uniqueness and agency over nature. At the same time, Aboriginal people, whose humanity had to be acknowledged but whose livelihoods appeared to disturb universal man's developmental path, were increasingly seen as suffering the fate of a 'dying race' (Hiatt 1996). Such was the implausibility of the Australian savage to the Anglo-European model of 'the human' and human development, especially after failed efforts in a number of the Australian colonies in the early-mid 1800s to educate, christianize and settle such people, that one witnesses by mid-century a profound doubt about their potential for improveability. Indeed, civilization was increasingly seen in biological – racial – terms. For example, in the writings of English cultural evolutionists such as E. Tylor and J. Lubbock (see Mulvaney 1957; McGregor 1997), civilization was understood as the peculiar achievement of certain 'races', with the 'takeover' of the white man assured. In the words of Ling Roth (1887), drawing on the work of Lubbock's opening chapter of the *Origin of Civilisation*, 'a savage mind is not likely to grasp the real position which would arise from cultivation of the soil' (Lubbock 1870, 118). When it came to the Australian savage, Ling Roth observed in an extended discussion about hunter gatherers, that the 'first system' known to man for breaking up the soil 'can be seen in operation to this day in the greater part of Australia' (Ling Roth 1887, 128). It followed that only those indigenous people who had become tutored in pastoral pursuits on cattle and sheep stations in New South Wales, would, in the words of NSW Royal Agricultural Society spokesman, spare themselves their race's 'destiny of extinction' (cited in *Elector* 26 March 1898).

Juxtaposed with the diverse 'white natures' on proud display at Sydney's agricultural show, were often miscellaneous collections of Aboriginal hunting and war

implements, 'relic bark habitations' and other items of fossilized, indigenous material culture (e.g. *Daily Telegraph* 13 April 1900; *The Sydney Mail* 27 March 1907). These were the 'last survivals of savagery' in the words of a newspaper report of the Show's various displays in 1901 (*The Sydney Mail* 30 June 1901). With colonial (and later on) government-sponsored schemes promoting closer settlement on small holdings across the colony (Davidson 1981), it bears noting that the 'destiny' of Aboriginal non-farmers was as much sealed by fiat as it was by fate.

Prizes and judges: 'improvement' through competition

If civilizing the idle territory of New South Wales by white settlers was advanced by the late nineteenth century, it was also an achievement to be publicly marked, including, and perhaps especially, in the settler cities. The Sydney show attracted a wide range of livestock, produce and farm machinery, as well as of course, people to view them. Like agricultural shows elsewhere, throughout Britain and its settler colonies, display and judging were the primary purposes. In that sense the genre of the colonial agricultural show was the dramatized enactment and re-enactment of the normative tale of civilization. Its rationale was to adjudicate the fine differentiations wrought by breeding experiments, both functional and aesthetic, and to bring them into a set of performances in the City where humanity was thought to have found its ultimate realization beyond the life of things that simply live. This script of man's 'special heading' (Glendinning 2000, 25) had found its seemingly natural vindication on the once savage surfaces of the continent of Australia.

Not that it is helpful to conceive of the show's displays only as communicative texts whose surfaces might be deconstructed for their hidden meanings. As stated earlier, it is possible to work against the subject-object duality implied by critiquing the 'gaze' over objectified sites. Foregrounding the co-productions of organic and inorganic elements, ideas, knowledges and labour in the hybrid beings of the cow, the maize, the petunia, the cider, the tractor, and so on, marks a more general move within contemporary social theory away from conceiving the world as a system of signs, to taking seriously its embodied materialities and enactments.

Regarding livestock, the cattle show at Sydney typically attracted immense interest. From the turn of the century, cattle and horses travelled by rail to Central Station where they were walked or driven through the city to the showground. Some stampeding cows in 1910 – wholly at odds with their ritualized representation at Moore Park – fled the scene of their passage through the central business district of Sydney and caused major upheaval (Cooke 1996, 45). At the urban showground, such guerrilla acts did not belong to the cattle's elaborate framings. Shorthorns, Herefords, Devons, Jersey and Holstein were some of the major categories of awards for dairy and beef cattle. The Victorian connections between ideas of breed, lineage, purity, pedigree and status (Ritvo 1997) were replayed in the show's competitions, especially the Grand Parade, commenced in 1907. In that annual spectacle, champions from each 'class' of horse, cattle and goat – their bodies draped in red, white and blue ribbons – circled the main arena in an intricate but precise choreography (Plate 1). Controlled by the ringmaster, the procession of winners dramatized the triumph of humanity's experimental elaboration of the nonhuman.



Plate 1: Grand Parade, Royal Easter Show, Moore Park, Sydney, c.1910

Source: Photo courtesy, and with permission of, Archives, Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales, Homebush Bay, Sydney

There were other sculptured forms. Stallions were brought to the showground, put to the test of the race track, and judged according to speed, size and symmetry. Dressed poultry, arranged into what were called ‘table varieties’, ‘egg producers’, ‘general purpose fowls’ and ‘the ornamental’, were judged by members of the government Board of Exports on the strength of their ‘fineness of bone for the London market’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 12 April 1898, 10 February 1900). Poultry producers even laundered white breeds to bring out the bloom of plumage, an amplification of animal nature which (for my purposes) can be evoked to parody the excesses of the civilizational tale.

Turning to displays of produce, an initiative was proposed by the society in 1899 to hold regional exhibits of farm, dairy and floral products at the annual show (Dunncliff 1922). The following year, in 1900, a District Exhibition Court was opened at Moore Park to enable ‘comparative examination of the products of the soil’, including those from the state’s irrigation farm at Moree. Known as the District Societies’ Competition, it attracted entries most years from the major agricultural regions of NSW. Prizes of money were donated from private sponsors, most of whom were Sydney-based, as well as government departments. The hope was that the district exhibits would represent ‘the producing power of each locality’, and place into ‘honest rivalry’ the ‘metropolitan demonstrations’ of what is enabled by ‘the soil and climatic conditions peculiar to each district’ (*Sydney Mail* 19 August 1899). In the days leading up to the Show, truckloads of produce were delivered to the showground and district society members, many of them women, proceeded to mount the typically elaborate exhibits. These were judged for their range of produce, the visual appeal of their assembly, and the taste, smell and texture of sample pieces made available to show-goers and judges.

The association between agricultural improvement and white nation-building in New South Wales became explicit after 1901, when the colonies became federated into the Commonwealth of Australia. The District Societies Competition was held up as an ‘education’ in what the colony had become, a ‘testimony of the wealth and progress of the lands and people of New South Wales’ (*The Sun* 15 April 1935, RAS

Newscutting Book), ‘a magnificent witness to the sturdy faith and industry of the men and their womenfolk on the land’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 16 April 1935), and a ‘living pageant of the productivity of the Australian soil’ (Royal Easter Show, Souvenir Guide, 1951). The moral capital identified with nature’s supercession was a key prop of the Australian variant of civilized whiteness by the early twentieth century. In that sense, the show’s displays were emblematic texts of civilization’s arrival on the continent. But more than that, as products which constituted the very ground in between humanity and nature, their entanglements call up (for my purposes) less purified conceptions of humans and nonhumans than those which obtained in civilizational discourse and practice.

Displays of farm machinery were also key features of the Sydney show. In ‘marking our progress in the development of resources and the settlement of the soil’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 7 April 1899), the exhibits by companies producing and selling agricultural machinery occupied pride of place at the showground. If one of the defining measures of Australia’s nation-building effort was ‘improvement’ and ‘settlement’ of the land, then the reapers, binders, threshing machines, horse rakes, shearing machines, wool presses, balers, water pumps, windmills, sheep dips and so on, that had centre stage at the show, were its primary instruments. In 1908, the RAS Annual stated,

To the keen agriculturalist, ever on the look out for something to aid him in combating drought, in clearing land, in fighting the rabbit, every bit of machinery, every turn of the cog of the wheel, every hiss of the steam engine and every whirr of the windmill is sweeter than Orpheus and his lute. (RAS Annual 1908, 34)

In the showground’s ‘machinery avenue’, with its booths and tents, farmers were introduced to machines ‘to conquer the worst wilderness in Australia, and reduce the most unyielding soil to a state of tractable fruitfulness’ (*Daily Telegraph* 12 April 1900).

In an obvious sense, modernity’s technologies were intimate partners in British geopolitical projects in Australia. ‘Settlement’, the manifestation of colonization, was a hegemonic constituent of white nation-building. But arguably the technologies of European modernity were not only implicated in this process; they underwrote imperial extension abroad (see Adas 1989). For, if we foreground the normative divide that had been inscribed in humanist thought between the world of artifice and technology, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a world of nature on which machines were thought to do their work, another vector of power emerges for critical scrutiny. This modality of power takes as its governing conceit the premise of not only human uniqueness – something which was, however begrudgingly, afforded to Australia’s Aborigines – but more crucially here, human ‘emancipation’ from a passive world of objects in nature. According to that measure, the likes of boomerangs and stone splints did not afford the technical means for human freedom from nature. They did not promise ‘improvement’ in any form intelligible to Western settlement, land use, property and production narratives. It followed that indigenous peoples’ displacement from the Australian continent could be regarded as being as inevitable as the civilizing path on which the human race as a whole was launched.

Many anti-colonial scholars have already noted that Aborigines were typically seen by British colonists as existing ‘closer to nature’. This caricature of Aborigines has frequently been read critically as symptomatic of European ethnocentrism, racism and an imperial will to power. Without disputing that reading, one can productively augment it with a post-humanist critique that confronts the developmental trajectory presumed to inhere in the progressive realization of the *humanity of the human*. In point of fact, and further to Latour’s (1991 1993) efforts to collapse the technology/society, modernity/tradition divide, the technologies that everywhere and ceaselessly link humans and the nonhuman world suggest the following observation: that the tomahawks, axes, wedges, boomerangs and other ‘socio-technical objects’ of Australia’s traditional Aboriginal people equally held in position specific ‘mobilizations’ of artifice and nature as did the windmills, tractors and harvesters of the Show’s machinery avenue⁹. Although not the ‘hybrids’ of Latour’s discourse (see Strathern 1999), such Aboriginal inventions share with ‘modern’ ones the means through which humans engage practically with the nonhuman world. In this sense, the hybrid things of *all* societies help us do away with the pervasive hierarchies that the genre of the colonial agricultural show so confidently inscribed.

Sideshow alley: aestheticizing remnant wildness in the 1930s

Although the RAS took moral authority from its role in the ‘proper development of our natural resources’, and insisted its annual event was ‘no empty carnival’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 7 April 1899), no show was considered complete without entertainment. The means of persuasive communication of the virtue of the rural sector extended to a range of ring events: maize-husking contests, apple pyramid contests, guessing competitions for the weight of slaughtered bulls, the ever popular dog parades, horse jumping, trotting and steeplechase, and most popularly of all, the wood-chopping competitions.

Wood chopping was a competitive sport in all the Australian colonies from the late 1890s (Mant 1972, 113). Heats were introduced to the show in 1899, and winners attracted generous prize-money as well as enthralled crowds. Few events symbolized so triumphantly the mastery of external nature – in the case of Australia, an apparent wilderness to be cleared – as the tree-felling and standing-block cut contests. These were dramatizations of the clearing practices that were transforming landscapes and lives at large. Before crowds of spectators, men dressed in cricket whites were timed to cut through 40-centimetre vertical trunks of eucalypt hardwood timber or horizontal blocks.

Like all normative performances that operate through the reiteration of ritual practices, however, there were events at Sydney’s show that inverted the serious business of displaying nature’s rational improvements. No show was complete without Sideshow Alley. By the 1930s, this liminal space within the Moore Park showground, included tent attractions such as: ‘The Chinese Midget Wonders’, Princess Wong and King

⁹ Interestingly, a paper published in 1892 by a member of the Linnean Society of NSW on Australian Aboriginal implements, drew a distinction between what were called ‘civilized’ raw materials, such as iron, wire and glass, and ‘aboriginal materials’ (of wood and stone). It followed for the author and society member (Mr Etheridge) that certain implements, in combining the two sets of materials in a ‘cunning mix’, belonged to the ‘half-civilized’ Aborigines (Anderson 1998, 137). The more transformed the artefact from a baseline in nature, the more (apparently) civilized the user.

Chong; 'Fat Lady Jolly Nellie' who described herself as '783 pounds of baby doll'; a living fairy; 'Anna-John Budd', half man/half woman; pygmies, miscellaneous freaks and other ruptures to the representation of orderly cultivated nature. Titillation for fair-goers had, since the time of medieval markets in Europe, been found in the wonders and oddities of monsters (Broome 1998). In the case of the agricultural show, titillation resided in a quite specific parodic reversal: the thrill and fear of the 'throw-back'. Such frightening embodiments as were targeted in England's eugenic movement of the 1920s and 1930s (Stepan 1982), told of the power of selective breeding 'gone wrong'.

That which escaped or exceeded the prescribed norms of culture–nature representation at the show also entered events in the body of 'Wild Iron Eyes, the Indian Chief'. Iron Eyes and his colleague High Eagle, both from Oklahoma, entertained crowds in the 1930s with their displays of buck-jumping and other antics of horsemanship (Rodeo Program 1939, 3–4). Wholly at odds with the predictable parades of horses in human service at the Grand Parade, buck-jumping was said in 1936 to arouse 'the primitive in all of us' (*Sydney Mail* 8 April 1936). There were other performances of remnant wildness – of 'survivals of savagery' which, by this time, had become crudely racialized in the bodies of the generic savage worldwide. In 1938, some RAS members travelled to North America where they recruited 'a colony of Red Indian braves' from the western region of Canada for the 1939 Show (RAS 1939, Brochure, 13–16). Boasting the Australian public 'will get to witness typical representatives of the vanishing race of wild Red Men', the society anticipated these 'dashing spectacles' of premodern wildness would 'capture, as nothing else has been able to do, the spirit of the back country in the days of outlaws and horse-breakers' (RAS 1939, 3) before Australia's 'back country' was launched out of its idle state. Against this embodied staging of the *residual* wild lay the unmarked norm of white, cultivated Australia that was centre stage in the spectacular theatres of the showground.

There were, fragilities, however, in the scripting of indigenous wildness in the anterior space of nature. Not all events lined up so neatly with the evolutionary figurings that were enacted ritualistically in the 'March to Nationhood' on the RAS's showground in January 1938 (RAS 1938, Official Souvenir Programme, 3–16). Its first float, for example – replaying the heroic narrative in which white settlement overtook Australia's savage – traded in familiar enactments of 'primitive Australia, with Aborigines and their gins cooking possum outside their gunyah' (1938, 3). Yet at the 1930 show, there was a lively rupture in the storyline of wild nature's erasure by civilization. Indeed, more than that – more, that is, than might be permitted by a critique of the show's visible surfaces – there was an embodied rupture in the ontological field enclosing the universal human of the civilizational tale. In 1930, Leo Appo, an indigenous woodchopper from Tweed River in NSW, undercut the host of meanings surrounding the axe and the dying savage in colonial Australia, when he won the standing-cut championship in the prestigious wood-chopping schedule (Redding 1986, 82). Come 1935, before a 'cheering crowd of 125 000', he won the Show's tree-felling championship in 'just four minutes' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 20 April 1935) (see Plate 2). In this micro-intervention in colonial Australia's civilizational discourse by a boundary figure characteristically positioned at the limit of the human, there are glimpses of placements that don't fit the neat orderings of the living world handed down by humanism.

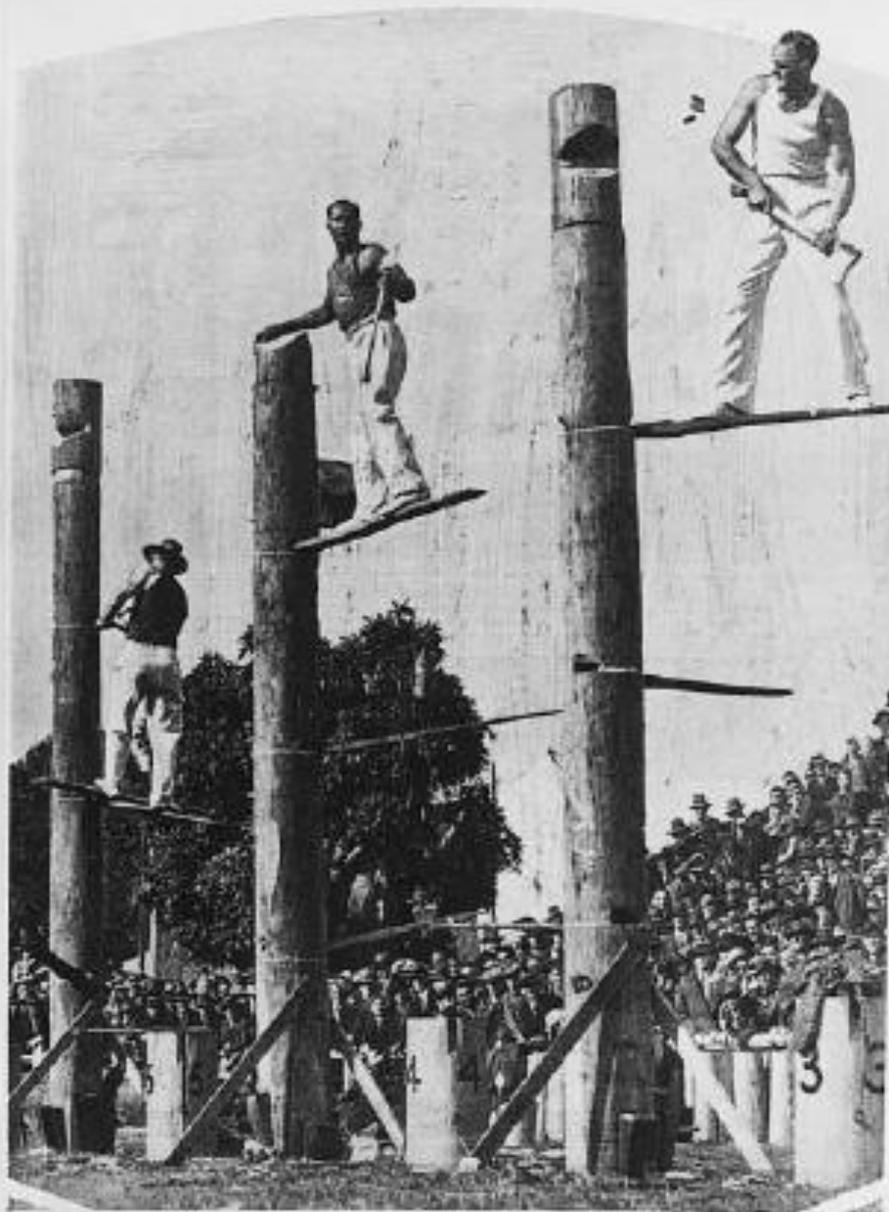
Conclusion

This paper has attempted to augment critiques of British colonial encounters with its savage New World ‘others’ by calling into question a most foundational way of thinking about ‘the human’ and human history. I have suggested that the triumphal narrative surrounding nature’s cultivation supplies a useful set of tools for supplementing the ‘race and identity problematic’ of critical empire studies. This body of work has given us voluminous studies of white power and indigenous victimization under the diverse projects of European imperialism. In an attempt to engage critical race theory and anti-colonial criticism in a more sustained problematization of their own, however, I have turned to Anglo-European doctrines of human exceptionalism. Working with an assumed divide between humanity and nature, this doctrine held that the essential humanity of ‘the human’ is that which separates people from a condition of mere animality; furthermore, that humanity is itself a civilizing essence realized through the advances from that baseline condition that were bestowed by what Sauer in 1956 called ‘learning, or Culture’. The *felt* sense of the human – buried in a classical anthropology that has been remarkably persistent (Glendinning 2000), and which seems unaffected by the insights of modern science regarding the capacities of nonhuman animals – is increasingly being called into question by the emerging critiques of philosophical humanism in Western thought. I have used these critiques to interrogate the (presumed) advances of learning and technology involved in the selective breeding of animals and plants, herding and other agrarian practices. These specific technologies turn out to be of crucial ontological importance in the narrative edifice of ‘the human’ because they were presumed – including to this day in some world histories (e.g. Smith 1995) – to set the whole human race on its trajectory of freedom and improvement.

In the Australian colony of New South Wales, few organizations were as intimately implicated in effecting the surfaces and spatialities of white ‘settlement’ as the colony’s agricultural society. From the late eighteenth century, the savage surfaces and societies of the colony were materially transformed in the image of an ontology of settled cultivation. Post-Darwin, when discourses of human exceptionalism were smuggled into racialized understandings of humanity’s cultural evolution, the power-effects of the conception of humanity as something which had *raised itself* out of a raw existence, intensified across the Australian continent. So while the props of settled cultivation were, from the 1890s, brought into the city of Sydney as proud displays of settler agency, the Aboriginal *non-cultivator* as the embodied, counter-example to universalist models of ‘the human’ and human development, became scripted as a ‘dying race’.

Sydney’s Royal Agricultural Show has been the event through which I have examined the constitutive and performative logics of settled cultivation. I have chosen a most ritualistic spectacle of human agency in a contested site of white nation-building with a view to undercutting that event’s iconic and practical power. By evoking the hybrid

The Sydney Mail 24/4/35



THE TREE-FELLERS

Explosives (which are being used) are necessary in the special case of wood for the work-shops. This year the first winner is the man of the 'tree' and second prize was won by a total of 100 lbs. This, after a very hot and dry day, the winner (who started to the ground) and report the performance as his work was. The exhibition at the school proceeds very well, and after the new season several of the patterns exhibited the silver and medals and the New South Wales Agricultural Society (which is a very good thing) is the winner. As the winner, Leo Appo, had had a very good day, he had the first prize in the 'tree' and was taking to the ground. It was the first time the winner had ever won a prize, although he had a very good day. The fact that the whole performance was over in less than four minutes gives some idea of his extraordinary skill and speed of hand.

Plate 2: Leo Appo wins the Show's tree-felling competition in 1935
Source: Photo courtesy, and with permission of, Archives, Royal Agricultural Society of New South Wales, Homebush Bay, Sydney. Reproduced from *The Sydney Mail*, 24 April 1935

forms of human and nonhuman making – and juxtaposing their physicality with their elaborate modes of representation in a colonial setting where diverse indigenous groups of people had built up different relationships with the nonhuman world – I have attempted to derange any certainties about the relationships between humanity and nature. I have also tried to recuperate, without recourse to a shrill vocabulary of colonial mastery (e.g. Lines 1991; Mason 1997), the sense in which colonial differentiations of ‘race’ found some of their defining logic in a humanist worldview of culture–nature separation. In problematizing that separation with the tools of posthumanist criticism, my aim has been to unsettle the ground beneath the *linked* conceits of speciesism and racism toward the world’s ‘premodern’ people. Bringing animality into a geographic sensibility, and more narrowly speaking, those sentient animals who have long been the reference point for the achievements of ‘culture’, promises to instill a more lively sense of movement between ‘our’ and for that matter, ‘all’ diverse states of being. It also helps us un-imagine, and indeed un-*feel*, the conviction of the human as the being who transcends the merely natural.

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