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Kay Anderson

The definitive version of this article is published in:

Anderson, K. 2008, ‘‘Race’ in Post-Universalist Perspective’, *Cultural Geographies*, 15(2): 155-171.

The definitive version of this article is available online at:

<http://cgj.sagepub.com/content/15/2/155.abstract>

(institutional or subscribed access may be required)

The journal *Cultural Geographies* is available online:

<http://cgj.sagepub.com/> (institutional or subscribed access may be required)

doi: 10.1177/1474474007087499

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‘Race’ in Post-Universalist Perspective

Kay Anderson

Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney

Abstract

This article takes the subject of the rise of racial discourse in the 19th century as a focus for extending critical race theory (CRT) in Cultural and Historical Geography. It pursues a critique beyond the familiar claim of race's legitimatory function to elicit the fundamentally unstable and crisis-ridden origins of innatist thought. Crucially, this requires a situated account - one that emphasizes the singular challenge that Australian colonial encounters aroused in Enlightenment notions of human unity and development. Far from confirming European views of 'savage' others, it argues that nature/native encounters on that continent precipitated a crisis in existing ideas - all the more contentious to today - of what it meant to be human. And, in emphasizing the palpably material sense in which Australia problematized European classificatory schema, the article opens one pathway from representational to 'more than representational' accounts in Cultural Geography. It also offers a potentially transformative understanding of the violence of humanism, in relation to both human and nonhuman.

Keywords: Chinatown - critical race theory - culture/nature/colonialism - humanism - race historiography - theorizing from the periphery

Introduction

One toils away earnestly - some days ineffectually in front of the empty computer screen, other days immersed in a creative rush - and three or so decades later, it is possible to talk of a 'life's work'. For me, the curiosity to get to grips with the rise and resilience of the discourse called race became - during the course of a journey across disciplines and hemi- spheres - something of an intellectual passion. It is therefore a real pleasure to have this path and its various published outputs acknowledged and affirmed by my colleagues and peers, and specifically the Ethnic Geography Speciality Group of the Association of American Geographers to whom I especially thank for this honour. So, then, a paper in three parts: a shorter semi-autobiographical section that contextualizes my past and current thinking on Race and Geography, a second, longer section that pursues a line of enquiry based on new research into the historicity of the concept of race; and third, some thoughts on 'rematerializing' critical race studies in Geography.

Let me establish - at least retrospectively - some logic or 'design' behind the data of experiences informing this paper. Not that the end was ever apparent in the beginning of life-as-a-geographer in the (very) Deep South, of Australia. The *shape* of my pursuit of race genealogy had no goal that was visible on the horizon from the start. But some sensibilities were discernible then, as now. Indeed, it was only quite recently when I found myself in a privileged post in the Far North, at Durham University, that I felt the loss of the situated perspective that 'grew me up' to use an Australian Aboriginal expression. 'Geography matters'

as Jane Jacobs and I wrote some years ago,¹ even in the making of Geography! Sitting in Fay Gale's undergraduate classes, reading her book *Urban Aborigines*,² attending her field trip to an abjectly poor Aboriginal mission in Central Australia, and others to the German landscapes of South Australia's wine districts, I recall the inspiration of charismatic teachers, but also discomfort with the kind of Cultural Geography in circulation at that time: an uneasiness with the ghettoization that seemed buried in the very logic, however sympathetically relativistic, of 'minority studies' in geography. I felt obliged to ask, at least myself: from where came the presumption that saw fit to designate and deploy the notion of 'difference'? Why had such a binary conception of difference/sameness come to structure settler thought and practice?

I recall asking Fay if, instead of doing an Honours thesis on the segregation between indigenous and non-indigenous populations in South Australia's country towns, or Greek cultural organizations in Adelaide, or the resettlement of Vietnamese boat-people – to generalize the point, yet another study of minority group 'x' in place 'y' – whether, instead, I might examine some aspect of white settler culture, perhaps the rural retreat movement, or more likely – given the impossibility I was finding of 'thinking' culture without politics in a settler society such as Australia – the colonial culture of an elite institution such as Adelaide's legal establishment. It was valuable training in a sensibility to cultural analysis (broadly conceived) that made the University of British Columbia's Geography Department – and another settler and immigrant society, of Canada – such a fertile habitat for me to pursue postgraduate studies. Reading widely in the interdisciplinary doctoral coursework program there, and absorbing the post-positivist philosophies taught in its Human Geography department, I began to confront the epistemological issues surrounding those awkward distinctions of 'us' and 'them' that I had been only able to sense as an undergraduate. Coming into contact with Edward Said's *Orientalism*³ and emerging critiques of the concept of race in sociology and anthropology, my research engaged a district in Vancouver called 'Chinatown' that seemed to lend itself readily to the narrative framing of ethnic studies with which I had grown up, but which also, I would come to see, could be critically re-imagined through the lens of successive western discursive practices.

The motivation behind that project was not, however, a critique per se of the kind of ethnic geography/minority studies mentioned earlier. This was incidental to the primary aim: of contributing a critical historiography of 'race' at a time in the 1980s when the post-structuralist turn was unsettling truth-claims more generally in Human Geography. It was a 'cultural turn' that I think it is fair to say derived significant force and effect from the critique of racializing processes and their relation to the identity politics of colonial and post-colonial formations. *Vancouver's Chinatown*⁴ belonged to that agenda, turning the burden of explanation of such ethnic enclaves away from innate difference – in that case, an essentialized Chineseness – to those armed with the power to define and manage identity and place. And to clinch the critique at stake, it seemed necessary to register how the history of racialization concerned us, not only in a past from which we could take distance, but in our

¹ Anderson, K. & Jacobs, J. (1997) 'From Urban Aborigines to Aboriginality and the City: One Path through the History of Australian Cultural Geography', *Australian Geographical Studies*, 35(1): 12–22.

² Gale, F. (1973) *Urban Aborigines*, Canberra: Australian National University Press.

³ Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*, London: Penguin.

⁴ Anderson, K. (1991) *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980*, Buffalo and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press.

own present. So, then, a study of Chinatown not only when it was negatively stigmatized and marginalized by state practices, as Vancouver's 'vice town', 'cess pool', 'opium den' and so on, but also of the forms the district's racialization took in the more recent past: its figuration and fashioning by state practices as a 'civic asset', 'heritage site', and Vancouver's own oriental 'contribution' to multicultural Canada.

My attention to a century-long passage of time served another more fundamental critical purpose too. This was to keep an ontological plot moving, one that tracked the very making of Chinatown. It was a task that entailed thinking time/space/place/race together, or conjuncturally, to use a current term. Hence my attempt at the site of Chinatown, and after Massey's 'extraverted sense of place',⁵ to collapse the binaries of local/global and inside/outside within the historically shifting trajectories of colonial capitalism, migration, and city/nation-building. Undo the fixity of race, and a thick complex of scalar constitutings seemed to present themselves!

Critical Race Theory: Race as Representational

Since the late 1980s the interdisciplinary field of 'critical race studies' has pursued the claim that race has no necessary epistemological status in itself, but depends on the context and organization of its production for its political effects. Race is a discourse that engages in conceptual and perceptual government, in its apprehension and legislation of types, distinctions, and criteria for assessing proximity and distance between human groups, and in its more technical applications: for example notions stipulating that certain forms of labour are appropriate to one 'race' but not another. There is nothing foundational – no fact of nature – underpinning responses like fear and prejudice toward racialized others. Racism is not given in difference per se, but is a socially constructed response to *markers* of difference. In the political interest of defending a universal humanness, we are told that racism entails not a response, but an *appeal*, to difference. As such it affords a hold on the power that justified European expansion into the New World from the 1600s onwards.

In Geography, we have now seen a generation of research, including from scholars in the Ethnic Geography Specialty Group of the Association of American Geographers, on the material workings of this process across diverse time periods and settings - from plantation slavery to settler colonialism. The mutations of racial thought and the ubiquity of whiteness as a cultural norm in the discursive practices of nation-building, place-making and landscape formation, have been demonstrated in many important contributions.⁶

One notes, too, as part of that agenda, a crucial augmentation in the critical analysis of race that took place in Human Geography from the 1990s, attending to its complex inter-action

⁵ Massey, D. (1993) 'Power-Geometry and A Progressive Sense of Place', in Bird, J. *et al*, (eds), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, London: Routledge, pp. 59–69; more recently, see Marston, S. A., Jones III, p. J. & Woodward, K. (eds) (2005) 'Human Geography without Scale', *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers*, 30: 416–432.

⁶ Notably, though barely indicatively, Jackson, P. & Penrose, J. (eds) (1993) *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation*, London: UCL Press; Peake, L. & Kobayashi, A. (2000) 'Racism Out Of Place: Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New Millennium', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 90: 392–403; Moore, D. S., Kosek, J. & Pandian, A. (eds) (2003) *Race, Nature and the Politics of Difference*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press; and, Schein, R. (2006) *Landscape and Race in the United States*, London & New York, Routledge.

with other markers of identity and multiple discriminations.⁷ An example of this intersectional optic from my own work entailed interjecting gender positionings and subjectivities into the storyline of *Vancouver's Chinatown* – complicating the 'too neat' binary of a racialized 'them' vs a racialized 'us' in that account.⁸ I undertook a further auto-critique using material on Melbourne's Chinatown in the 1970s and 80s. There I charted the unlikely class alliance of Chinatown entrepreneurs and white working-class unionists who joined together to fight the government sponsored redevelopment of Little Bourke Street as an Oriental quarter in that city.⁹ Racialization is a process of struggle, after all, involving contestation and contradiction: it is a complex process that for all its endurance and discursive mutation in institutions, laws and everyday life, calls out for situated accounts of its negotiations – accounts that is, of race's very specificity and contingency.

And yet it is precisely this point, that, it seems to me, needs to be made all over again. For all the critical attention to race's contingency over the past decade, it continues to appear like an inexhaustible constancy! Let me contextualize this claim a bit further before moving on to the second part of this presentation.

For many years after writing *Vancouver's Chinatown* – continuing to work as I did on other racialized sites (for example, in Sydney, of urban Aboriginality where it was brought home to me the strategic significance of racialized forms of solidarity for those reckoned to be on the 'wrong' side of race) – a simple question never went away. It recalled my earlier curiosity with the binary conception of sameness/difference that has historically been forged under the sign of race. And it was as follows: *why* did physical and behavioural markers become signifiers, not only of difference, but also of relations of inferiority and superiority? Why, in the face (as it were) of vastly differentiated gradients of skin color and physical differentiation,¹⁰ did such a deterministic conception of difference arise? What made possible the intelligibility of the idea of racial difference and hierarchy?

The inclination of many critical race accounts (including *Vancouver's Chinatown*) and much post-colonial work in Geography that demonstrates the historical and political connections between race, knowledge, space and power, is to link racial thought and practice to their function in imperial and other oppressive regimes like slavery. This tactic is to effectively, if not intentionally, assimilate racial thought to something apparently more fundamental – not essentialized prejudice, of course, but instead, a white will to power. And while it is commonly acknowledged that such power was and is not always or everywhere total or complete, and was often resisted in variously militant and subtle ways, the dissonances within, and resistances to, racialized power are typically subordinated to the narrative presumption of a dominating impulse. This is an impulse that continues, even through critically constructivist accounts, to be fundamentally unproblematized, as I will come to in a moment.

⁷ Starting with Kobayashi, A. (1994) 'Unnatural Discourse: "Race" and Gender in Geography', *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 1(2): 225–244.

⁸ Anderson, K. (1996) 'Engendering Race Research', in, Duncan, N. (ed.), *Bodyspace: Destabilising Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, pp. 197–211.

⁹ Anderson, K. (1998) 'Sites of Difference: Beyond a Cultural Politics of Race Polarity', in, Fincher, R. & Jacobs, J. M. (eds), *Cities of Difference*, New York: Guilford, pp. 201–25.

¹⁰ Saldanha, A. (2005) 'Re-ontologising Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24(1): 9–24.

A number of problems potentially trouble accounts that track the various *ways of articulating* racialized inferiority to the defense of white power, profit and privilege. To be clear, I refer to ways of articulating inferiority, like, Chinese are 'wily and addicted to vice', Africans are 'brutish', New World indigenes are 'child-like', 'closer to nature' and 'maladapted to cities', African Americans 'lack intelligence', and so on. So while there is little with which to disagree in the claim that racial discourse provided a support for the exercise of imperial power - to deny that would be absurd – I have nonetheless discerned a number of problems in explaining racial discourse in terms of its effects. None of these problems - specifically, of overgeneralization, functionalism, and circularity – discredit critical race theory (CRT), which will continue to be a crucial intellectual and political movement. However, precisely *because* the idea of race has furnished some of the most pernicious justifications of exploitation known to us, I have wanted to understand its genealogy more rigorously.

This task, after Donna Haraway's 'situated knowledges'¹¹ and the by now numerous other sustained feminist critiques of universalist knowledge production, is above all a work of locating in time and space the rise and specific character of a deterministic idea of human difference known as 'race'. I'll spend some time in what follows on the grounded historiography of race, nature and the human I have recently put together on this subject.¹²

Theorizing Race from the Periphery

Many generations of researchers of race's intellectual history across many disciplines have noted the hardening of ideas in the 19th century: from a relatively benign notion of race as 'tribe-nation-kin' to race as 'innate-immutable-biological'. Perhaps most famously, the anthropologist and historian, George Stocking, in observing this shift, specifies a number of what he calls 'speculative contexts' associated with it.¹³ He lists them as follows: the demise over the early 19th century of Christian ideas of single human origins; the discovery of geologic time; the questioning of slavery in the US in the early 1800s and the uncertainty to which this gave rise regarding the place of free blacks; and, colonial land acquisitions across a range of settler societies. In suggesting these contexts, he declines to – in his words – 'account for this change'.¹⁴ Nancy Stepan in her influential book *The idea of race in science*, falls back on the claim, unusually vague for that book, that 'come the 1850s, a new biological determinism was in the air'.¹⁵ For Stepan, Stocking, and many notable others including David Theo Goldberg, Michael Adas and Ashley Montagu,¹⁶ 19th century innatism was an *extension* – a consolidation in invidious form – of European enlightenment, medieval, and ancient notions of difference and hierarchy.

¹¹ Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist studies*, 14(3): 575–599.

¹² Anderson, K. (2007) *Race and the Crisis of Humanism*, London & New York: Routledge.

¹³ Stocking, G. W. (1968) *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*, New York: The Free Press, p. 36. See also Stocking, G. W. (1987) *Victorian Anthropology*, New York: Free Press.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Stepan, N. (1982) *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960*, London: Macmillan, p. 41.

¹⁶ Goldberg, D. T. (1993) *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing; Adas, M. (1989) *Machines as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press; Montagu, A. (1965) *The Idea of Race*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

To be more specific, there is no doubt that the views of 18th century figures such as Edward Long (cited by Adas) and Voltaire (cited by Goldberg) anticipated developments in the 19th century, and that there are consistencies between mid-19th century ideas of racial difference and their antecedents dating back at least 400 years. The project I set myself, however, was to take a harder look at this 'straight-line'¹⁷ model of race intellectual history. After Hannaford, this is a line that effectively links the Nazis and the eugenics movement of the 20th century, to the racial scientists of the 19th century, to the theoreticians of stadial human development and hierarchy in the 18th century, to the associations of blackness with the devil in the 16th century, back to Aristotle on 'barbarians'. For me, this linear narrative risked obscuring precisely how radical the turn to biological essentialism was in the 19th century. It risked flattening a history of ideas that was significantly more differentiated (and interesting). Innatism – I came to conclude – was not a *consolidation* in extreme form of what had gone before, but something distinct – something whose specific and fragile character has been lost in the usefully critical – but nonetheless universalizing – tale of race's vast capacity to reproduce itself under conditions of power-differentiated culture contact.

There are problems of over-generalization in tales that gloss over space as well as time. Over the past 20 years the study of European portrayals of New World indigenous peoples has taken a distinctly critical turn. Discourse analysis, in postcolonial studies, history, geography, anthropology has sustained a lively critique of the discursive alignment of indigenous people with nature in the settler colonies of North America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Characteristically, the 'closer to nature' myth is taken to inhabit the fellowship of racist discourses that served European imperial and white settler interests of dispossession and other modes of subjugation. To condense things greatly, the debts have largely been to Foucault's notions of discourse and dividing practices, and so, to an oppositional characterization of colonial discourse in which the (white) self is defined in relation to an other who is negated and constructed as savage. Jahoda's *Images of savages*, Spurr's *The rhetoric of empire*, Attwood's *Power, knowledge and the Aborigines*¹⁸ are just some of the discourse analyses from the 1990s that, after Said's elaboration of Foucault,¹⁹ critique savagery as a form of 'epistemic violence ... that reveals more about the cultural, ideological and literary suppositions of the colonising order than the savages themselves'.²⁰

¹⁷ Hannaford, I. (1996) *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, Baltimore, MD & London: Johns Hopkins Press.

¹⁸ Jahoda, G. (1999) *Images of Savages*, London: Routledge; Spurr, D. (1993) *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*, Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press; Attwood, B. (1992) 'Introduction: Power, Knowledge and Aborigines', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 35: 1–16.

¹⁹ Foucault, M. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock.

²⁰ Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, p. 3. See also the range of work on European modes of ordering, controlling and mastering the environments of colonies. A vitriolic case in point from Australia is William Lines' 1991 *Taming the Great South Land: The Conquest of Nature in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin) that dwells on nature's 'othering' – its possession and domestication by British settlers who saw themselves as superior to nature. The *anti-humanist* impulse to that line of argument is at odds with the *post-humanist* account developed in this article. Rather than accept – in the very lament of nature's maltreatment by humans – a separate realm of nature, I subject the notion of 'the human' to its own historicized reading, thus strengthening the ontological enquiry into New World encounters with people and environments. It should be added that human uniqueness is not disavowed in this reading. There is no recourse to a baldly naturalistic vision of human continuity with nature, nor to a deep ecological vision in which people are fully human only as, and when, they connect with nature. But nor, on the point of human distinction, can the conceit be sustained of 'any unique sort of uniqueness' in the phrasing of Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's 2004 *So you think you're human?* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 36.

In the Australian context, the historian Bain Attwood has concluded that colonial characterizations of Aboriginal people as 'closer to nature' were symptomatic of what he calls 'a mutually supportive relationship between power and knowledge'. 'At least since Enlightenment modernity', he writes in the now very familiar paradigm of race historiography, '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'.²¹ Succinctly, the problem in this constructivist perspective is its idealist formulation of discourse. Typically, on this account, the world is – as it is said – 'constructed'. And it is considered to be constructed in the terms, and according to the interests, of a discourse that arrives from elsewhere; and which applies itself in a way that, exhausting 'what' it constructs, erases the possibility of referring to 'it' as anything *other* than a construction of discourse.

In the area of colonial discourse analysis, as just mentioned, the idea of racial difference among the world's people has conventionally, as well as in recent critical accounts, been seen as a handmaiden of colonialism. Such accounts have thus focused upon how the dispossession of indigenous people can be traced to a fundamental discursive operation of symbolic 'othering'. And whether this operation is understood as a psychologically motivated aspect of identity formation or whether it is linked to the binary structures of Occidental thought, this othering operation is turned into a 'logic' which has come to define colonialism. Precisely 'what' is encountered tends to disappear - effaced and muted into what historical geographer Cole Harris describes as 'an amorphous imperial soup'.²²

Thinking, as I have, from the location of one space of empire – colonial Australia – it was my sense that the generic designation, of 'New World savagery', was to disavow many of the things that were important about this Antipodean space of analysis.²³ The totalizing notion of New World savagery was also to overwrite – as I'll come to in the next section – many of the conjunctural factors that were generative in relation to the rise of a deterministic idea of racialized human difference in the 19th century. Armed, too, with the tools of a 'post-humanism'²⁴ that is prepared to open the ontological gates of race criticism beyond a tightly guarded field of 'identity politics' to an engagement with nature – it was my sense that the representational trope of New World savagery required a fresh line of problematization. It wasn't enough, in other words, to reiterate the influential but standard critique that New World people were negatively stereotyped as 'sub-human', or 'in-human' or 'less than human' or, that they were callously 'de-humanised'. Moving beyond that claim required a line of problematization that has so far been absent in CRT and the blockages erected (for sound

²¹ Attwood, 'Aborigines', p. iii. See also Ryan, S. (1996) *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers saw Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²² Harris, C. (2004) 'How did Colonialism Dispossess Comments from an Edge of Empire', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 94(1): 179.

²³ See also Instone's case for Australian Environmental Studies: Instone, L. (2004) 'Situating Nature: On Doing Cultural Geographies of Australian Nature', *Australian Geographer*, 35(2): 131–140.

²⁴ Jordan, W. D. (1968) *White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro, 1550–1812*, Baltimore, MD: Penguin; Kuper, A. (1988) *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformation of an Illusion*, London & New York: Routledge; and, significantly, see Schiebinger, L. (1993) *Gender's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, for a gender inflection of this argument, critiquing the images and treatment of women as discursively aligned with other colonized bodies; also Magubane, Z. (2003) *Bringing the Empire Home: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, London & New York: Routledge.

political reasons) against all things considered suspiciously as 'nature'. It required a critical sensibility that was willing to traffic *across* the human and nonhuman spheres. Deploying CRT within this enlarged framework and constituency, I could see the possibility of convening a new conversation across the (conventionally split) knowledge spheres of race, the indigenous, the postcolonial, and nature.

Australia's State of Nature/Native

To now move into the detail of this argument, I want to consider the perceived *extremity* of Australian people and natures in the late 18th century. Australia was the land where it was said by one English explorer 'a different Creator must have been at work'; where exist the most 'singularly bizarre creatures' and 'vegetable vagaries' (as plants were often called). Regarding the landscape, which was said to show no trace of cultivation – it was, as declared – in a 'pure state of nature' showing no imprint of 'the hand of man' ([sic], and on the point of gender, see notes 20 & 21). Remote, antiquitous - or so representational accounts of the continent went – Australia was, in the words of a French explorer in the early 1800s, the 'most insulated department of the world defying our conclusions and mocking our studies'. So peculiar – it was said – was the likes of the kangaroo – which, in the words of zoologist George Shaw needed 'a distinct genus' – that, Bernard Smith concludes in his book *European vision and the Pacific* that 'traditional European ideas concerning the nature of the universe were exposed to novel and difficult questions in Australia'.²⁵

As for the people, the Dutch explorer to Australia, William Dampier, set the tone back in the 1600s in describing them as 'the most miserable of people in the world ... with no houses, skins garments, sheep, poultry and fruits of the earth'. For Joseph Banks, who observed that 'even the North Americans sow'd their Maize', the Australians demonstrate 'less art and industry than any human beings probably that the world can shew'. For James Cook - although free of what he saw as the 'chains' of civilized life - the Australians had the 'feeblest canoes' and the 'flimsiest huts'. For Surgeon-General John White, they were 'indeed beyond comparison the most barbarous on the surface of the earth'. Later on, for observers starting to think in more physical terms, they had the leanest limbs, the narrowest ankles, and as we shall see later, the smallest skulls.

²⁵ Smith, B. (1985) *European Vision and the South Pacific*, New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, p. 167. For the sources of original works cited in this and the next paragraph, see Anderson, K. (2007) *Race and the crisis of Humanism*, London & New York: Routledge, ch. 3. Regarding the misrecognition of Aboriginal women's yamming practices in the colonial claim against cultivation, see Hallam, S. (1975) *Fire and Hearth: A Study of Aboriginal Usage and European Usurpation in South-Western Australia*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. The gendered colonial reading of what was thought to qualify as 'cultivation' has a tantalizing relevance to my account here of human self-definition and race. But the task of subjecting notions of gender and gendered notions of culture/nature to post-humanist analysis would need to address at least as many specificities as attempted here in relation to race. For example, it is not clear that 'proximity to nature' arguments invoked over the centuries in relation to women elicited the same tropes of animality, or to a nature to be 'improved', nor again, distinct species arguments.

FIGURE 1: 'A View of the tree at Botany Bay, wh yields of Yellow Balsam, and of a Wigwam', Arthur Bowes Smyth (1788). Source: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, reproduced with permission.

FIGURE 2: 'A singular Animal called Kangaroo'. Source: White, John (1790) *Journal of a voyage to New South Wales*, London: J. Debrett Picadilly, no page.

FIGURE 3: 'Platypus' (water colour by J. W. Lewin, 1810). Source: Reproduced with permission, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, ML ref 1364. For colour reproduction see Neville, R. (1997) *A Rage for Curiosity*, Sydney: State Library of New South Wales Press, p. 35 [exhib catalogue].

FIGURE 4: 'Smoking out the Opossum' aquatint by M. Dubourg. Source: Plate from Clark, J. H. (1813) *Field Sports & co. Of the native inhabitants of New South Wales*, London: Edwd. Orme, no page. (Rex Nan Kivell Collection, The National Library of Australia, la-pic-an8936118). Reproduced with permission.

I have been interested in how this characterization, less of 'difference' or an abstracted 'otherness', and more precisely of extremity, even perversity, wasn't so much rolled into European knowledge systems or legitimation projects (as for now standard critical accounts), but on the contrary *deranged* them. Engaging recent post-humanist perspectives and debates,²⁶ my interest has been in how colonial encounters in Australia from the late 18th century *disturbed* Enlightenment expectations about human distinction from the nonhuman world. *Race and the crisis of humanism* thus charts Australian nature/native encounters that rattled the cage of a humanism that was itself fraught with uncertainty about 'the human' place in relation to nature. This ambiguity about the human relation to the nonhuman world is no less palpable in western-derived cultures today. 'Are we in or out of nature?' Raymond Williams asked some years ago – a question whose irresolution has grown only more contentious into the 21st century's biotechnical era of human/ animal/ machine assemblages.²⁷

Observations from colonial Australia were especially troubling to Scottish and French Enlightenment models of human development, according to which people were presumed to realize their very character 'as human' in a progressive movement out of, and control over, nature – with nature conceived as both exterior and interior to the human. So, for the social contract theorists, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke, it was the cultivation of human reason over natural instinct or desire and, correlatively, the *cultivation* of land in the transition to a civil society characterized by property, law, the institutions of government, and city life, that defined a distinctively human development. Such 'stadial theories' were developed in the context of the colonization of America, accommodating the American Indian who, it was observed (of the Iroquois and Huron among others) showed some signs, however rudimentary, of surpassing savagery.²⁸ Like the so-called 'Hottentot' or African of the Southern Cape with their observed skill with cattle, metal blades and copper,²⁹ the American Indian's settlements and crops were data for the thesis that people – however unimproved their condition – sat on a scale of variation in which *all* were *potentially* separate from nature.

So, whilst savagery constituted the lowest level of an undoubtedly pernicious hierarchy of the world's people for Enlightenment stadial theorists,³⁰ it was conceived as a temporary condition that would, via an 'ascent' through progressive stages of development, give rise to civilization. For this reason John Locke famously extrapolated in the first of his *Two treatises on government*: '... in the beginning all the world was *America*'.³¹ Diderot put it this way: 'All civilized people have been savages and if left to their natural impulses, all savage people are

²⁶ Post-humanism is an increasingly diffuse and disputed sets of perspectives developed across many disciplines, but in Geography, see the various contributions to Castree, N. & Nash, C. (2004) 'Mapping Post-Humanism: An Exchange', *Environment and Planning A*, 36: 1341–63. Posthumanist scholars, in Geography and elsewhere, have typically been concerned with human environment relations, whereas the focus here on race draws attention for their own purposes to the profound stakes and cultural struggles in the western definition of 'the human' (as separate from nature).

²⁷ Williams, R. (1985) *Keywords*, New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁸ Meek, R. L. (1976) *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

²⁹ Hudson, N. (2004) 'Hottentots and the Evolution of European Racism', *Journal of European Studies*, 34(4): 308–332.

³⁰ Goldberg, D. T. (2002) *The Racial State*, Oxford: Blackwells Publishing.

³¹ Locke, J. (1960 [1689]) *Treatises of Government*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

destined to become civilised'.³² Race was a subdivision, or mere variety, of a universally improvable human. Such was the unity of people in Enlightenment thought – both in the eyes of God and according to a unique nature-transcending essence.

My own storyline on this – and obviously to greatly compress things here – is that Australia's perceived peculiarity in relation to other New World settings, coming off the back of encounters in America and Africa, forced into difficult re-negotiation the figure of 'the human' as separate from nature. Australian encounters turned into a problem the humanist binary of in nature/out of nature, the more so into the early decades of the 19th century with the *failure* of numerous, variously systematic, efforts to settle Aborigines. Note the bafflement, even despairing tone of the Secretary of the Colonial Office in London, Lord Stanley in writing to Governor of NSW George Gipps in 1842. Somewhat against the instrumentalism of Said's characterization of Orientalism and also, here, in the spirit of a more *affective* historiography of race, note Stanley's bewilderment:

I have read with great attention, but with deep regret, the accounts contained in these despatches.... it seems impossible any longer to deny that the efforts which have hitherto been made for the civilisation 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.... I should not, without the most extreme reluctance, admit that nothing can be done for this most helpless of race of beings; that with respect to them alone the doctrines of Christianity must be inoperative, and the advantages of civilization incommunicable.³³

As perplexity turned into suspicion at the developmental idea of savagery, speculation grew – or so my thesis on the rise of a deterministic idea of race goes – as to the possibility that Australia's savages were unimprovable. Going further, the claim of *Race and the crisis of humanism* is that 'the Australian' presented such a problem to the humanist paradigm of surpassable savagery as to radically transform its terms into an argument for their innate condition.

And, this possibility admitted, explication was sought through a comparative form of enquiry to other indigenous people, and from there, to all 'the races of man'.³⁴ In the US, J. Campbell's pro-slavery reader *Negro-mania*,³⁵ is just one example that captures how the innatist intellectual turn was impelled not only by an 'inferiorizing mythology', in Said's words, but more specifically by the issue of savagery and its surpassing: 'Never at any given time,' Campbell stated, 'from the most infinitely remote antiquity until now has there appeared a race of Negroes – that is, men with woolly heads, flat noses, thick and protruding lips, who has ever emerged from a state of savageism – look to the West Indies, to Brazil, and to Australia'. Paraphrasing the Scottish anatomist, George Combe, in his *System of phrenology* in 1853,³⁶ the New Zealanders were 'above' the Australians because 'they cleared trees and hewed wood, and cultivated potatoes and corn', while in turn 'the American Negroes' were 'above' the New Zealanders – and again note the particular humanist formulation of

³² Cited in Pagden, A. (1993) *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism*, New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, p. 153.

³³ 20 December 1842, cited in Colonial Office, (1844) *Papers Relative to the Aborigines, Australian Colonies* British Parliamentary Papers, pp. 221–3.

³⁴ Knox, R. (1850) *The Races of Man: A Fragment*, London: Henry Renshaw.

³⁵ Campbell, J. (1851) *Negro-Mania: Being an Examination of the Falsely Assumed Equality of the Various Faces of Men*, Philadelphia, PA: Campbell & Power.

³⁶ Combe, G. (1853) *A System of Phrenology*, New York: William H Coyler.

civilization – owing to 'a certain concentration of mind which is favourable to settled employments on the land'.

Note too, in the 'Table of Measurements' from Samuel Morton's *Crania America*,³⁷ how the emerging science of craniology adopted a comparative form of presentation (Figure 5). In particular one notes the placement of the 'Australian family', providing the very frame for calculating all the races. It was a measurement project that continued right through (and paradoxically so, in ways I can't develop here, but see Chapter 5 of *Race and the crisis of humanism*), the Darwinian era and the post-evolutionists of the late 1800s, by which time the colonial project in Australia had grown more violent, even genocidal. As critics of 19th century race science have already observed, the world's people could now be ranked. But here I emphasize a ranking according to a logic that can be more precisely formulated than the likes of Gould's 'European measures of worth'.³⁸ Beyond the now familiar appeal to, in Said's words, 'the constant positional superiority of the Westerner',³⁹ the claim here is to more incisively explain – indeed problematize – the humanist obsession of race science with the skull. Presumed to house the organ of mind, its form and size became the measure of people's capacity to discipline their interior nature. The head, as such, was not just the intermediary for a racism that legitimated colonialism. Craniology can be understood according to the fact that it was not simply a racist practice that was indifferent to the head, but rather a humanist practice that was obsessed with it.

To be clear, the point is not that the Australian was positioned on the lowest point of a pecking order, as numerous critiques of the so-called 'de-humanization' of New World people have already argued. In other words, the claim is not that 'Aborigines were wrongly thought to have the mental capacity of monkeys' – as if pointing the finger at the vulgarity of the animal analogy actually reveals something explanatory about colonial attitudes. The more general point here is that race science, and specifically, craniology, was less a rational defence of white power, less the unfaltering culmination of Enlightenment othering, than a frantic and unstable attempt to re-assert the fragile figure of 'the human' as a nature-transcending being. What was at stake was not only the (false) conceit of race, but the very idea of human distinction from the nonhuman world.

It was an effort that grew all the more anxious come the threatening Darwinian thesis of human continuity with the apes (Figure 6). Indeed craniology became increasingly preposterous – not only flawed, but desperate – in its fetishization of skull shape, brain size, and measures of cranial index (and where those measures were not definitively correlating with intellectual deficiency, then supplementary ones were invoked like jaw shape, palate configuration, even eye and nose sockets!) My claim through this account of *crisis* at the limit of the human, is that the Aborigine was not just paradigmatic support for a deterministic idea of race, but *constitutive* of it. The Aboriginal body came to stand as 'ground zero' in time and space of a peculiar *figuration* of the human. And, as mentioned earlier, in providing the reference point for a notion of 'the human' as separated from nature, the Aboriginal fixed – though always precariously – an innatist idea of hierarchy into which the other 'races' were slotted.

³⁷ Morton, S. G. (1839) *Crania Americana: Or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America: To Which is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species*, Philadelphia, PA & London: Lippincott Gramoo & Co, Trubner & Co.

³⁸ Gould, S. J. (1997) *The Mismeasure of Man*, London: Penguin.

³⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 7.

I conclude these few words on crania with some comments upon the following Table, taken from Morton's printed *Catalogue* (Philadelphia, 3d edition, 1849): —

TABLE, showing the Size of the Brain in cubic inches, as obtained from the measurement of 623 Crania of various Races and Families of Man.

RACES AND FAMILIES			No. of Skulls.	Length L. O.	Breadth B. O.	Height H. O.	Mean.
MODERN CAUCASIAN GROUP.							
Teutonic Family	—	GERMANS	18	114	70	90	92
"	"	English	8	103	61	86	
"	"	Anglo-Americans	7	97	62	90	
Persianic	"	Persians	10	94	75	81	
"	"	Armenians					
"	"	Circassians					
Celtic	"	Native Irish	9	97	78	87	
Indo-Chinese	"	Bengalees, &c.	33	91	67	89	
Semitic	"	Arabs	8	96	61	89	
Negroid	"	Fellahs	17	96	66	80	
ANCIENT CAUCASIAN GROUP.							
Persianic Family	—	(Ethio-Egyptians (catacombs).	18	67	76	66	
Negroid	"	Egyptians (from catacombs).	68	96	68	80	
MONGOLIAN GROUP.							
Chinese Family			6	91	70	82	
MALAY GROUP.							
Malayan Family			20	97	68	86	86
Polynesian	"		3	84	62	82	
AMERICAN GROUP.							
Totipic Family	—	PERUVIANS	156	101	53	76	79
"	"	Mexicans	12	98	67	77	
Caribbea Tribes	—	ICHOUANS	101	104	70	84	
"	"	Lenape					
"	"	Cherokees					
"	"	Shoshonis, &c.					
NEGRO GROUP.							
Native-African Family			62	96	63	88	83
American-born Negroes			12	80	73	82	
Native-African Family			8	88	66	76	
African Family	—	Australians	8	88	68	75	

Figure 5: 'The size of the brain in cubic inches obtained from the measurement of 623 crania of various races and families of man'. Source: From Morton, S. (1849) *Catalogue*, Philadelphia, 3rd edn., here reproduced from Nott, J. C. & Gliddon, G. (1871) Philadelphia, Lippincott, Grambo & Co, p. 450. Reproduced with permission, The University of Michigan Making of America collection.

Figure 6: 'Sections of Skulls of Man and Various Apes'. Source: Figure 17 in Huxley, T. (1897) *Man's Place in Nature and Other Anthropological Essays*, London & New York, Macmillan, p. 109.

Re-materializing critical race studies

I have been emphasizing the provocation that Australian nature/native encounters introduced to international knowledge-making about human difference in the 19th century. In the specific line of 'natureculture' critique of Enlightenment colonial modernity developed here, our attention has been directed to the diverse sites at which 'being human' confronted limits that rendered problematic its force and meaning. Colonial Australia was one such generative site. And as I have tried to evoke, it has been somewhat against a discursive idealism or constructivism, that I have wanted to restore to the colonial encounter - and specifically the colonial encounter in Australia - something of its character *as an encounter*. This focus, too, as I will briefly outline in some closing remarks, is to suggest a pathway - one among

doubtlessly many other ways – of putting materialism back into critical race studies for Human Geography.

Eric Santner in his recent book *On creaturely life* has described '[t]he opacity and recalcitrance that we associate with materiality' as being 'most palpable where we encounter it beyond our capacity to endow it with meaning ...' that is, he states, where we encounter something beyond our capacity 'to integrate it into our symbolic universe'.⁴⁰ In this reading, 'the material' is that which exceeds discourse. It is not the thingness of things per se – the objects – let's say, in the examples depicted in earlier figures, of plants and animals, topography, bodies and skulls. There is no return implied here to an essentialist metaphysics or objectivism that, as Matthew Kearns has pointed out, identifies the material as 'real'. To re-figure a point that Hayden Lorimer has made in the context of Cultural Geography, 'the material' might productively be sought in what he calls *more-than-representational* theory.⁴¹ Adapting Lorimer (and Homi Bhabha⁴² on the limits of colonial discourse), 'the material' is that which can't be reduced to discourse; it is that generative excess that comes into play at the constitutive limit of discursive power.

So, in the account I have presented today, going back to those quotes from early colonial Australia of its 'singular' creatures and 'oddities' (Figures 1, 2 and 3), the limits of a certain discursive apprehension of Australia were evident from the late 18th century – a limit bound up with the fact that colonial discourse operated *in, and not simply on, a world*. This suggests for our geographical sensibilities here, no inherent singularity to a place which, after all, was 'always already' in constitution with other parts of the colonized world. Instead it is to evoke the palpable, and palpably more-than-representational, encounter with the continent's strangeness – the strangeness of its plants, its creatures, and the 'stubborn geometry', as a number of artists have described, of its landscape.⁴³

And, as I have gone on to elaborate here in the primary plot of this account, it was in the context of that more general problematization that Australia posed for European classificatory schema, and ultimately for the idea of a single creation, that the intractable Aborigine posed a similar challenge to the humanist developmentalism of Enlightenment Christianity. Interjecting this perspective from 'the periphery' into what, over the decades, have been some profoundly over-generalized theories of colonial power, race, and savagery can, then, be generative. Not in the sense of providing a 'case study' from the South – nor, either, a kind of reverse discourse that speaks or writes back from the colony, so re-centring the core/ periphery model of knowledge production. But more like *theorizing from* the periphery – highlighting the specific, radical, and crisis-ridden character of racial determinism and its emergence within a broader puzzle that endures to today - that of the fraught relation of human to nature. This, I offer here, in the spirit of post-universalist theory in Human Geography more generally.

⁴⁰ Santner, E. L. (2006) *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.

⁴¹ Lorimer, H. (2005) 'Cultural Geography: The Busyness of Being "More-Than-Representational"', *Progress in Human Geography*, 29(1): 83–94; Kearns, M. (2003) 'Geographies that Matter – The Rhetorical Deployment of Physicality', *Journal of Social and Cultural Geography*, 4: 139–152.

⁴² Bhabha, H. K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.

⁴³ Cosgrove, D. (1990) 'Environmental Thought and Action: Premodern and Postmodern', *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers*, 15(3): 354.

Biographical Note

Kay Anderson is Professor of Cultural Geography at the Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney. She has published widely on race historiography including *Vancouver's Chinatown* (McGill Queen's University Press, 1991 and 2005) and *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (Routledge, 2007). She is an elected Academician of the Academy of the Social Sciences (UK) and elected Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. She can be contacted at: Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, Australia; email: k.anderson@uws.edu.au

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