

Race and the Crisis of Humanism

KAY ANDERSON, 2007

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The thesis of *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* suggests that the liminal figure of the Australian Aboriginal forced a fundamental rethinking of Western ideas about how humans originated and differentiated. The Aboriginal was not so much inscribed by Western ideas, as she was, instead, an active presence in their emergence. Approaching the indigenous inhabitants at first with the understanding that all humans have the capacity to develop toward civilization, the colonists found that the Aboriginal was beyond assimilation. Kay Anderson plots the radical development of racist biological essentialism through the body of the Aboriginal in the land of Australia. Here was a continent of mammals that were not really mammals, of ‘vegetable vagaries’, and of people who had not and would not, the colonizers learned, cultivate the soil. This encounter created a fundamental disturbance at the boundaries of European thought on the question of the human.

At the Ethnic Geography Distinguished Scholar session at the 2007 AAG, I had the good fortune of hearing the author and a panel of critics speak about *Race and the Crisis of Humanism*. The book provoked some dissent from panelists Audrey Kobayashi, Richard Schein and Peter Jackson. For instance, they argued, against Anderson, that social constructivists do not deny physicality, that anti-racist scholarship has been more-than-representational for many years and that the white will to power has never been understood as complete or total. These comments appear to be directed toward Anderson’s argument that critical race theory has made functionalist and circular arguments about race and racism. She notes, first, that racist thought and practice has tended to be reduced to its function—mystification arising to serve the needs of slavery, colonialism etc. Second, a circular argument claims that “the *ways of articulating* inferiority (dirty, child-like, amoral) are internal to a vast fellowship of racist discourses”. In both, the “specific and changing character of thought” becomes only a discourse “rationalizing something more fundamental”, the will to power (p. 198 her italics).

With this critique, Kay Anderson situates her book’s concern with “*why* a place closer to nature was assigned” to Aboriginals (p.198 her italics). Racisms are better analyzed as the assertion of human exceptionalism relative to the animality of humans and nonhumans—not as the dehumanization of the Other via associations with nature. Opening the question of the human rather than the issue of exclusion from humanity, her book points to how the 19th century version of the human (one who transcends nature by making it bend to his will) was put to the test in Australia. Thus for her, stopping at the wilful, racist bestialization of non-white people by Europeans is not enough because “the discursive alignment of non-whites with animals reveals something more distinctive than a white ‘will to power’” (p. 201). What drove her book, then, was the need to explore what it meant to be ‘properly human’ in the 18th and 19th centuries and how the human became something different in the white European-Australian Aboriginal encounter. This “intimate, fretful” struggle with the uncertainty of what ‘is’ the human gave rise to the European narrative of biological racism. She writes, “[f]ar from being being a rational defense of power, innatism was a preposterous contrivance” (p. 202 her italics). It is the shifting of these ideas that Anderson documents superbly, making it clear why these questions are important to the study of race.

The (above) panelists' critiques are in debate with others who, like Anderson, find absent the *embodied* emergence of identities in discursive accounts of the types constructed through representation (see Kerin, 1999; Colebrook, 2000; Grosz, 2005; Probyn, 2005; Saldanha, 2007). Very briefly, for these authors, to materialize the study of race would be to propose that there are groupings of bodies that are noticed for their physical characteristics. These bodies emerge spatially as raced bodies in connection to other things. They have certain tendencies and ambivalences as well as social and physical limits. It is not that bodies are inscribed; they actively participate in the material production of themselves and other bodies. These ideas, promoted by the feminists cited above, have been written with sex and gender (not race) in mind and are generally important to debates concerning difference. Moving beyond representation toward unsettling the "presumed ontological stability of constructs of the human" (p. 123) is an important idea to consider, whether one's research focuses on race or gender

Positioning herself as part of the rematerializing turn, Anderson claims that constructivists made the mistake of locating power in first, the strong emphasis on representation and second on representations produced by the West alone. She notes, further, that in claiming racial difference to be solely fiction, critical race constructivists made the most interesting things about race disappear. Diverging from her earlier work which drew on Edward Said and foregrounded representation and domination in the story of race, Anderson argues for an affective historiography of race that explores the horror, the wonder, the bafflement of encounters with "enigmatic and anomalous" difference (p. 203). Anderson considers the body through affect, principally the state of surprise, confusion and dismay of Europeans.

The book consists of six chapters. The introduction and conclusion position the work in theoretical terms. The conclusion can stand alone for an upper level undergraduate reading as it very effectively marshals the theory and evidence to make it clear to the reader what we learn by thinking race affectively through Australia's history. The other chapters outline the encounter of the West with Australia and the gradual shifts in thinking concerning origins, species difference, improveability and 'doomed race' through an analysis of the writings of scientists, colonial administrators and anthropologists. A clear elaboration of a pivotal point in the history of race, the book will inspire students to think critically about how differences emerge in their geographic and historic specificity.

Kay Anderson claims her project is not to make these ideas useful to current (presumably anti-racist) practice. I have no quarrel with this position; others can use her proposals for that purpose. Indeed, it is clear that this book *is* important to anti-racism, practiced through activism, scholarship and teaching, as a reminder to keep central the fraught and fragile aspects of race in formation *as part of* an analysis of racism's extravagant violence and subtle potency. Aiming at the humanist conceit of Western universality, she has shown how it 'stutters' (see Saldanha 2007)—an effort that undermines humanism and is useful for thinking about race, racism and encounter.

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Book reviewed:

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