

New Materialism and the Stuff of Humanism

Kay Anderson and Colin Perrin

WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT IS, AND OF COURSE ALWAYS HAS BEEN, SHARED WITH nonhumans. Given the urgency of our current ecological situation, how then can we challenge the idea—indeed the conceit—that humans are in some sense *irreducible* to nature? It is this formidably tenacious, and in the early decades of the twenty-first century patently dangerous, idea that this paper takes up. And it does so against the background of a widespread, and now increasingly ‘materialist’ concern within the humanities (and social sciences) to move beyond the legacy of a narrow, humanist conception of culture as something separate from, and elevated above, the natural world. Countering the idea that humans occupy a separate and privileged place among other beings has, of course, been the central goal of a now well-established post-humanist agenda: an agenda inspired above all, perhaps, by Bruno Latour (see, for example, *Politics of Nature*). And this paper shares the ambition of scholars working across a range of disciplines to ‘decentre ... the thinking human subject’ (Hawkins and Potter 37). Here, however, we want to question the way in which this ambition has been taken up, in cultural studies as well as elsewhere, in accordance with what the geographer Sarah Whatmore has referred to as a ‘recuperation of materiality’ (*Hybrid Geographies* 602).

Cultural theory has evidently turned away from its former interest in how the world is represented and interpreted by human beings. As the editors of a recent book on new materialism and the arts write: ‘The matter of the world can no longer be a mere resource’ for human thought and activity (Bolt 3). For Stephen Muecke, it is in an explicit rejection of ‘the idea that the world is a passive resource for use by active humans’ that “‘things” have taken a decidedly material turn’ (‘An Experiment’ 453; see also, for example, Bennett and Joyce; Coole and Frost; Dolphijn and van der Tuin). In particular, it is in the elaboration of what Jane Bennett calls an ‘ecology of matter’—taken up for example in the study of so-called naturecultures (see Hawkins and Potter)—that matter itself has come to be understood as a vital force (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*), and culture reconceptualised as a material entanglement of humans and nonhumans (Bennett, ‘Force of Things’).

Noting, in Bennett’s words, this ‘attempt ... to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common’ (*Vibrant Matter* ix), here we take our point of departure, not from the rich diversity of efforts across many disciplinary fields to acknowledge the ‘agency’ of nonhumans (see, for example, Sayes) or the force of ‘affect’ in human-nonhuman entanglements (see, for example, Latimer and Miele). Instead, and acknowledging the paradox of what might—although only at first—be construed as a focus on the ‘all-too-human’, our own attention is directed towards those human actants whose existence must also be considered on a ‘less vertical plane’. More specifically, this paper considers how the elaboration of a ‘monist’ (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 86) conception of culture-as-material has tended to foreclose an engagement—and indeed a materialist engagement—with what Bruce Braun has called the ‘particular figuration’ of the human as something more than a human animal (1352). For it is this engagement, we want to argue, that is crucial if the still insistent claim that humans are exceptional is to be rigorously confronted rather than just condemned and dismissed.

Seeking to attend to ‘the distinctive capacities or efficacious powers of particular material configurations’, Bennett herself explicitly brackets off ‘the question of the human and ... the literature on subjectivity’, strategically eliding ‘what is commonly taken as distinctive or even unique about humans’ (*Vibrant Matter* ix). This strategy aims to clear the way for a new materialist account of human-nonhuman interaction, beyond the humanist assumption that agency is an exclusively human attribute. Bennett does not, however, settle for the prospect of empirically repudiating this assumption. The ‘philosophical project of ... subjectivity’, she adds, ‘is too often bound up with fantasies of human uniqueness in the eyes of God, of escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature’ (ix). Here, then, the strategy of bracketing off ‘the question of the human’ from that flatter conception of culture now being advanced across various new materialisms is

supported by the contention that those qualities commonly regarded as differentiating and elevating humans from nonhumans are mere fantasies.

This characterisation of humanism has come to constitute a critical orthodoxy for those who reject the conceit that humans are exceptional. As John Gray writes, the still dominant ‘fantasy’—he too uses this word—that ‘we are not like other animals’ is no more than ‘a secular religion thrown together from decaying scraps of Christian myth’ (31). It is this claim that human exceptionalism is an essentially theological belief—and one that has, as Lynn White argued in his influential paper ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, remained a constant ‘despite Darwin’ (1205)—which has informed a more general new materialist rejection of humanism.

As a kind of enduring fantasy, the idea of human exceptionalism is usually traced—more or less directly—from Christian ideas about the soul, through Descartes’ mind-body dualism, and on to more recent conceptions of culture as a distinct realm of human agency. As Erica Fudge has noted, Descartes is normally taken to be ‘the poster boy for current representations of humanist ideas’ (182). But this is precisely insofar as he is understood as having ‘fused the Christian concept of an eternal soul (the image of God in humanity) with the more secular concept of the rational mind’ (Peterson 38). So, whether traced to Christian doctrine or to Cartesian dualism, new materialism sets itself against the conception of the ‘thinking [human] subject ... as *ontologically other than matter*’ (Coole and Frost 8). The ‘monism’ advocated by the editors of the recent collection *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* is, for example, explicitly opposed to ‘Cartesian dualism’ (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 86). Similarly, it is with reference to what he calls an ‘inescapably theological’ idea of mind—conceived as an ‘*immaterial* substance’—that the cultural theorist Richie Nimmo rejects a humanist understanding of culture. For him, this understanding of culture is described as ‘Cartesian “mind” collectivized’ (3, our emphasis).

It is, then, according to a classical ontological dualism—in which the defining characteristic of the human (as essentially immaterial) is separated from the nonhuman (defined as irremediably material)—that humanism has come to be understood as an ‘immaterialism’. Identified with the belief that the human mind is ontologically distinct (and not—as for materialism generally—simply reducible to biology), human exceptionalism is rejected as escapist fantasy. What we want to argue here, however, is that this critique of humanism constitutes something of a blind spot for the claim—which we share—that ‘everything is material’ (Coole and Frost 9). For if *everything* is material, wouldn’t the ‘fantasy’ of human exceptionalism also have to be considered a ‘material configuration’? And, as such, wouldn’t *its* ‘distinctive capacities or efficacious powers’ need to be treated as a ‘worldly’—rather than an ‘otherworldly’—construction?

Succinctly, if everything is material, if, that is, there is *only* the material, then this must also be the case for ‘what is commonly taken as distinctive or even unique about humans’. The ‘immaterial’ soul or mind cannot, therefore, just be dismissed, as if the materiality of everything somehow meant that souls or minds—in their ‘immateriality’—were non-existent. Indeed, it is precisely this mode of ontological critique—as it aims to oppose ‘the real’ to ‘the unreal’, or ‘the true’ to ‘the false’—that Latour, like Foucault before him, rejects. As Foucault maintained in his own critique of ideology: ‘the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false’ (119). Similarly for Latour—and in addressing the relationship between science and religion—‘knowledge’ is not to be opposed to ‘belief’, but rather both have to be understood as the product of ‘empirically graspable chains of translations’ belonging to ‘two different regimes’ (‘Coming Out’ 600).

Clearly, then, new materialism’s rejection of humanism as a mere belief is somewhat at odds with the now widespread recognition that ideas are no less material, are no less real, than things (see Law). It is not, therefore, a matter of rejecting humanism because it is ‘constructed’. Rather, insisting on the materiality of this constructedness, here we follow Foucault’s and Latour’s subversion of this type of critique. For, as soon as it is acknowledged that everything shares the same ontological status, the fact *that* things are constructed is no longer of critical importance. Rather, the crucial issue becomes *how* things are constructed. As Latour puts it, the key questions are then: ‘How well designed is it? How solidly constructed is it? How durable or reliable is it (according, that is, to the criteria of the discursive regime to which it belongs)?’ (*Reassembling the Social* 89). It is, therefore, in extending the insight that ‘everything is material’ to humanism itself that our aim here is to ‘open up’ the (radically ventured yet profoundly under-examined) thesis of human exceptionality, in order to see precisely how it has been assembled; to see—as Latour writes of Foucault’s analyses of power—‘the tiny ingredients from which [it] is made’ (*Reassembling the Social* 86). It is, therefore, in the recognition of its materiality that humanism can be seen, not as a fixed and unchanging doctrine; but rather as a shifting and contingent configuration of ideas, practices and technologies that—for this very reason—is susceptible to being configured otherwise.

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Our concern here with new materialism's critique of humanism arises in an ecological context that has seen a renewed commitment to the idea that humans possess a unique capacity to control their environment. Clive Hamilton, for example, has called attention to what he calls the 'techno fix of geo-engineering' (200): attempts to address the threat of ecological catastrophe via grand technological intervention, such as obstructing solar radiation with space-based mirrors; or, in Australia, covering endangered coral reefs with shade cloth and using electrical currents to stimulate their growth (Pearlman). What Latour refers to as the 'hubris' of such current reassertions of human ingenuity in the face of ecological catastrophe ('Will Non-humans be Saved?' 5) indeed warrants scrutiny. What, though, is the basis of this reinvigorated commitment to the idea that, in Gray's words, 'humans can free themselves from the limits that frame the lives of other animals' (4)?

As Nikolas Rose and Joelle M. Abi-Rached have pointed out, 'for at least the past century' humanism has been premised on the argument 'that human beings are *freed* from their biology *by virtue of that biology*' (2). And, even though the unique 'mental' abilities of humans still provide the basis for contemporary claims of human distinctiveness, it is in *physical*, rather than metaphysical, terms that these abilities have tended to be accounted for by today's human exceptionalists. Kenan Malik, for example, argues that it is in our very nature as human to transcend nature ('Materialism' 2). Raymond Tallis—a prominent critic of the claim that we are merely human animals—also states that 'we humans have transcended our biology' (6). These exceptionalist claims are explicitly distinguished from the theological position that we were 'created by a separate process, and in the image of the creator of the universe' (Tallis 45). Tallis, for example, insists that his own position owes nothing to 'a belief in Cartesian dualism, or the notion that we are immaterial ghosts in the material machine of the mind or the body' (11). Rather, for him too, 'we are all products of natural processes' (45). And, as such, what he, along with other contemporary humanists, proposes is 'a biological explanation of how it is that we have taken a unique path' (228-9).

In distinctly post-Cartesian terms, Tallis's own account of 'how we came to be fundamentally different from other creatures' is traced to the uniqueness of human anatomy (214). Recalling an argument that—as we will indicate—can be traced back to the comparative anatomy of the early nineteenth century, Tallis's account hinges on the observation that 'Although other animals assume the upright position from time to time, only man is overwhelmingly bipedal' (216). It is, he argues, this 'upright position [that] liberates our hands' (211). He then proposes that human cultural development may be understood as 'a dialectic or a ratcheting up between brain and hand such that increasing dexterity would

drive increasing brain size' and, in turn, 'the latter would promote increasing dexterity' (226).

As Tallis goes on to note, most explanations of human uniqueness tend to be based more exclusively 'on the fact that we have bigger brains' (215). In this respect, the claim of today's human exceptionalists that humanity has been successful in impacting the wider world is regularly linked to an argument that 'the size and complexity of the brain have evolved more rapidly in humans than ... in any other species, including apes' (Starr). The neuroscientist, V. S. Ramachandran, for example, writes: 'Although humans are apes, we are still ... something unique ... unprecedented ... transcendent ...' (4). 'Any ape can reach for a banana', he tells us, 'but only humans can reach for the stars' (4). Again, though, for Ramachandran, as for Tallis, the argument that 'the human ... is indeed unique and distinct from that of the ape by a huge mental gap ... is entirely compatible with [the] claim that we are biological' (12). Finally, Marilyn Robinson—in her recent critique of the 'para-scientific' reduction of humans to animals in fields such as evolutionary psychology and socio-biology—asks: 'What grounds can there be for doubting that a sufficient biological account of the brain would yield the complex phenomenon we know and experience as mind?' (119). She then continues to argue—and in direct opposition to a dualist ontology—that 'the mind, like the body, is very much placed in the world' (112).

In the context of these contemporary humanist arguments, can it really be the case—as Latour himself has contended—that 'we haven't moved an inch since Descartes' (*Pandora's Hope* 8)? That, five hundred or so years later, and as Latour goes on to lament, 'the [human] mind is still in its vat, excised from the rest, disconnected, and contemplating ... the world' (8)? As if some idea of human exception from nature had just persisted, again 'despite Darwin', and as if the idea of human exceptionalism had simply endured throughout—or even outside of—history, as some archaic and vain metaphysical belief? Or some naïve theological delusion?

As we have argued more fully elsewhere, at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, metaphysical arguments for human exceptionality were rejected and replaced by an account of the physical distinctiveness of human beings (Anderson and Perrin). It was following the *demise* of theological accounts of the human, and what was considered to be its exalted place in the so-called great chain of beings, that—as Rose and Abi-Rached note—a new, biological, idea of human exceptionality was elaborated. Anticipating the arguments of those such as Robinson and Tallis, the comparative anatomists of the period elaborated an explicitly scientific—and, indeed, materialist—account of human exceptionality. It was, moreover, an account that was explicitly opposed to what the English anatomist William Lawrence—writing in 1819—called 'immaterialism', and so

to the dualist assumption that the mind existed apart from the body. 'Where', Lawrence asked, 'is one to find proof of the mind's independence of the bodily structure? Of that mind, which, like the corporeal frame, is infantile in the child, manly in the adult, sick or debilitated in disease, frenzied or melancholic in the madman, enfeebled in the decline of life, doting in decrepitude, and annihilated by death?' (7).

The details of this shift in ideas about human exceptionalism lie well beyond the scope and focus of this article. Our purpose here is clarified, however, by a brief summary of the discursive and political manoeuvres at stake in a shift whose very historicity we wish to highlight for our more conceptual purposes. In short, it was by linking the uniquely upright nature of the human body to the shape of the human head that anatomists such as Lawrence, and before him Georges Cuvier in France, sought to develop a biological account of human uniqueness. It was precisely in the attempt to demonstrate that human mentality was a product of bodily structure—and so, again, in order to avoid invoking any ontological separation between mind and body—that a scientific interest in the head arose, and with it the notorious craniometric practice of measuring human skulls from across the major world regions. The verticality of the human head was understood as indicating the relative size and dominance of the brain—in Cuvier's words, 'the instrument by which the mind reflects and thinks'—over the 'animal' senses of smell and taste, identified with the nose and mouth (4). And it was in the extremely elaborate and unstable effort to correlate variations in head shape with the 'known' mental abilities of certain peoples—above all, those of different 'races', but also acknowledged 'geniuses' and 'idiots' (see Hecht)—that a physiological idea of intelligence was forged (Blanckaert 437; see also Williams). Understood as a mental capacity that varied between human beings, intelligence was nevertheless considered to be qualitatively different in *all* beings that walked upright. For if, as Cuvier maintained, 'intelligence ... is in constant proportion to the relative size of the brain' (30), this was, for him, quite literally because 'the more *elevated* the nature of the animal, the more voluminous is the brain' (25; our emphasis).

This shift from theology to biology *within* humanist discourse presents an obvious empirical challenge to the assumption that a notion of human exceptionalism has remained more or less constant (at least) since Descartes. But what this post-Cartesian shift in humanist discourse poses, we want to suggest, is not fundamentally an historical, but rather a theoretical, challenge to the current mode of new materialist rejection of humanism.

To claim—as, for example, Lynn White does—that although 'the forms of our thinking and language have largely ceased to be Christian', their substance has not (1205), amounts not to a demonstration of the continuity of human

exceptionalism itself; but rather, we suggest, to a presumption of its constancy. Shifts between Christian or Cartesian and contemporary ideas of human exceptionalism—not to mention the impact of later nineteenth-century debates around evolution—cannot just be assimilated to a singular historical trajectory, as if the history of human exceptionalism could be understood as nothing more than variations of the same humanist doctrine; and so as if this doctrine itself could be considered as just persisting ‘behind’ its various articulations. Following Latour, the latter cannot be adequately understood as mere ‘intermediaries’ for some ‘force or meaning’ they need only ‘transport’ (*Reassembling the Social* 39); which is to say that biological accounts of human exceptionalism cannot be adequately understood as mere ‘ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact’ (‘Why has Critique Run Out of Steam’ 227). In this respect, to construe humanism as somehow existing apart from, and before, its specific instantiations is to separate out some ahistorical *idea* of humanism from those very instantiations. It is, then, precisely to abstract humanism from the material.

The crucial point we want to make here, therefore, is not simply that new materialism has missed the historical shift in humanist discourse from theology to biology. Rather, it misses the fact that humanism is not just now, but *always was*—to use Bennett’s phrase—‘a material configuration’. It always had to be ‘assembled’, to be materially constructed. What becomes clear, then, is that ‘the immaterial’ itself must be seen as another kind of ‘material’ out of which humanism has been made. Again, humanism is not only now, but *always was*, a thing of this world. Here, therefore, we can discern a certain slippage in the new materialist critique, which dismisses humanism as if it were made of different ontological stuff. And it is a slippage that Latour himself—in his defence of a literal (which is to say, a materialist) constructivism against its discursive or linguistic counterpart (‘Why has Critique Run Out of Steam’ 227)—can help to clarify.

Latour argues that what is ‘constructed’ cannot be taken as ‘artificial, contrived ... and false’, as opposed to something that is taken to be ‘real’ (*Reassembling the Social* 90). Merely demonstrating that some ‘thing’ is ‘made up’ cannot, Latour insists, reduce it to ‘dust’ (92). Rather, to consider some ‘thing’ as a construct is to consider it as having been brought into being through the mobilisation and combination of a variety of elements that are always both conceptual and concrete, human and nonhuman (91; see also DeLanda).

Such is Latour’s own materialist understanding of constructivism. It is one which precludes dismissing certain things—like the soul or the mind—as products of mere thought, language, belief or fantasy. Instead the very assumption that language, belief and so on can—according to new materialism’s bracketing off of

humanism—be understood as somehow less-than-material is, we would argue, precisely what Latour's claim for the materiality of culture is pitched against. For Latour, every 'thing' is indeed made up. But whether it is fabricated out of beliefs or bricks, every thing shares the same materiality—and so, importantly, everything has the same ontological status. The crucial point here, therefore, is not to identify constructedness with some sort of a 'deficit in reality'—and, in this context, to reproduce a now familiar scientific rejection of theology. It is, rather, to consider *how* things are constructed. As Latour writes, it is precisely because 'construction is so much a synonym for the real that the question shifts immediately' to: 'Is it *well* or *badly* constructed?' (*Reassembling the Social* 89).

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Following Latour, our contention here, therefore, is that any adequate treatment of humanism has to proceed, not by bracketing it off from that materiality which humans and nonhumans share. For, to where could it be annexed? Instead, we are suggesting, what needs to be addressed is precisely how humanism itself was—and is—constructed out of this shared materiality. Even in its explicitly theological formulation, it would, for example, be possible to consider how—and how well—the soul was constructed via the doctrines, arguments, institutions, practices and so on of Christian theology. As Muecke has observed, 'we have only ever managed to philosophise with the help of things: the turning stars, apples which fall, turtles and hares, rivers and gods, cameras and computers' ('The Cassowary'). It would, then, also be possible to approach Descartes' own account of how humans are 'ontologically other than matter' from the perspective of his own references to, and claims about, a whole host of nonhumans: stars, ships, clocks as well as various animals, including ants, flies, parrots, monkeys and so on (see Descartes part V).

Furthermore, the classical assumption that there was 'an immaterial principle ... unique to man' was later supported in terms that went beyond Descartes' own theological and philosophical arguments about the differences between humans and nonhumans (Bynum 466). Seventeenth and early eighteenth-century naturalists, such as Linneaus, drew this conclusion—somewhat reluctantly—from their own inability to differentiate adequately the anatomies of humans from those of the great apes, whose existence had begun to trouble European naturalists from the late seventeenth century onwards (Corbey 40; see also Greene 177). Finally, when later naturalists such as George Friedrich Blumenbach in Germany came to refute the prevailing assumption—held by Linneaus, among others—that the great apes walked upright, then a physical, rather than metaphysical, account of human exceptionality became conceivable (Blumenbach 6). And, as we have indicated (see Anderson chapter 5; Anderson and Perrin), it was forged through the modern colonial practice of craniometry,

which in its desperate search for some correlation between head shape and intelligence relied upon an ever-changing variety of measures, ratios, protocols and instruments that, again, may be considered as the 'material' out of which a modern idea of human exceptionalism was produced. This idea, then, has variously—but always—been constructed. So whilst it may well be possible to argue that a theological argument for humanism is—in its recourse to the existence of an immaterial soul—constructed 'badly', such an argument cannot simply be rejected on the basis that, as immaterial, the soul is just a fantasy. And similarly, Descartes' dualism must also be considered as the product of a flat ontology, the bare assertion of which cannot be sufficient to do away with the dualism itself. It is, however, possible to discern in new materialism's reliance on the insight that everything is material a presumption of this sufficiency: as if the assertion of our shared material existence with nonhumans was, on its own, enough to overcome humanism's exceptionalist conceit.

Across many disciplinary fields in the cultural and social sciences, it is now possible to discern the displacement of a humanist 'order of reason, mind, or consciousness' (Plumwood 16) more or less term for term by an affirmation of the 'sensory, bodily and affective' character of human existence (Whatmore 'Materialist Returns' 606). Those dimensions of culture conventionally regarded as uniquely human—such as meaning-making, or fantasising—have thus tended to be excluded from the material, and thus excluded from the realm of materialist consideration. Indeed, now considered as somehow less-than-material, they seem to exhibit an uncertain existence in, to cite Whatmore, 'the abstract spaces of social life' (*Hybrid Geographies* 27).

The strain in this shift bears more critical examination. For, in bracketing off the 'thinking human subject' from the material, isn't there a risk of decentring the human not from culture, but merely from our descriptions of culture? As we have indicated, today's human exceptionalists readily acknowledge that we are biological creatures. It is just that human culture is distinctive, in Malik's words, because 'we *also* have self-consciousness, agency and the capacity for rationality' ('Science and the Human Animal' 51). And enter here the familiar claims of human distinctiveness and superiority. One can, then, readily imagine today's humanists remaining untroubled—if not just uninterested—by the numerous analyses across today's cultural studies of our material encounters with other materialities: as merely an analysis of something *other* than what they would consider to be culture.

In this respect, doesn't new materialism risk offering a somewhat straitened account of culture? That is: doesn't its own conception of culture-as-material remain limited by its strategic bracketing off of 'what is commonly taken as distinctive or even unique about humans' (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* ix)? And so:

doesn't the very project of revitalising nonhumans also suffer from a somewhat inhibited conception of the material? It is, we would suggest, possible to discern in this project—and in, for example, Bennett's own equation of nonhuman agency with the 'vibrancy' or 'vitality' of things—a strain or a reluctance to push those things too far in a direction that would seem to put into question their materiality. As if the notion of agency being evoked here had to stop short of that capacity for creativity and meaning-making on which the very project of humanism relies. Again, here, humanism cannot be excluded from that flat ontology which new materialism advocates. At least not without blinding itself to the richer conception of materiality suggested by Latour's observation—clearly intended to apply to both humans and nonhumans—that 'organisms themselves make up their own meanings' ('Will Non-humans be Saved?' 13).

To understand human exceptionalism as a worldly, rather than an otherworldly, construction is not, of course, to endow it with any kind of solid foundation. On the contrary: it is to expose its constructedness to an interrogation that, as we have indicated, the very bracketing off of humanism from the material has tended to foreclose. So, from this perspective, it becomes possible to see exactly how humanism has, in its diverse articulations, been fabricated. It becomes possible to see how an idea of intelligence that is still pervasive today was forged through a highly unstable set of practices and technologies out of a dubious and now clearly indefensible amalgam of physiognomy and nineteenth-century cultural and colonial prejudice. To approach humanism as a material configuration, and so to see 'the tiny ingredients' out of which it has been made, is, therefore, to be able to expose its contingency. As Joanna Bourke has recently argued, 'to understand the *instability* of definitions of the human, we need history' (5, emphasis added). And—somewhat against the straitened new materialist narrative—it is, precisely the disjunctures and discontinuities, the dead ends and the disasters, in the various formulations and trajectories of ideas of human distinction that its own materiality is able to reveal.

For Hamilton, plans 'to engineer the Earth through the deployment of contrivances to manipulate the atmosphere represent the fulfilment of three and half centuries of objectification of nature' (200). We accept that on the point of humanity's environmental impact Hamilton's concern is well placed. But to consider this 'objectification' as a kind of unwavering ideology, as an unswerving commitment to some invariant belief, is to grant it, not just an implausible constancy, but a dangerous consistency. It is, then, to obscure the very historicity of humanism. We urgently need to overcome the still pervasive idea that the value of human reason, meaning, knowledge-making and creativity lies in *rising above* our worldly—and indeed our animal—existence. But to effectively counter what Latour has recently referred to as 'the Australian strategy of sleepwalking towards catastrophe' ('On Some of the Affects of Capitalism' 1), this figure of the

nature-transcendent human must, we have argued here, be understood not as an otherworldly fantasy, but as a worldly, and for this reason an always-contingent, always-unstable, production. A materialist engagement with—rather than disengagement from—the idea of human exceptionalism is, therefore, vital for a humanities tuned to a planet under pressure. At least if this idea is to be exposed: not, to use Hamilton’s word, as ‘unrelenting’ (200); but rather to ‘the troubling and exhilarating feeling that things could be different’ (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 89).

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KAY ANDERSON is (fractional) Professorial Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture & Society at the University of Western Sydney. Elected Fellow of social science academies in Australia and the UK, she continues work on the ARC grant to which this piece relates, as well as an ARC Linkage (with the City of Sydney) and colleagues, Profs Ien Ang and Donald McNeill, about Sydney’s Chinatown in the Asian Century.

COLIN PERRIN is Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Culture & Society (UWS) in association with the above-mentioned ARC Discovery grant. With Kay Anderson, he has been researching and writing on the history of humanism and its intersection with ideas about race. He has also published in the areas of Indigenous rights, human rights and legal theory.

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