

*Tobias Rees*



A F T E R

E T H N O S

*After*  
**ETHNOS**

*After*  
**ETHNOS**

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TOBIAS REES

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Cover art: Étienne-Jules Marey, *Analysis of the Flight of a Seagull*, 1887. Etienne-Jules Marey/Dépot du Collège de France, Musée Marey, Beaune, France.

to my mother (1950–2012),  
who escaped in her very own way(s).

—

and to J (2003) and C (2008),  
whose lines of flight  
I hope to follow  
until my own final escape.

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*what if ...*

... what if the equation of anthropology, study of things human, with ethnography, the study and description of an ethnos, were a recent event? And what if one set out to undo this equation? If one were to cut loose the former from the latter?

Actually, what if one were to not only cut loose—liberate—anthropology from ethnos/ethnography/ethnology but also from “the human” *tout court*—from the in its aspirations time and place independent conception of the human as “Man” that first surfaced in the seventeenth century and that has since marked the condition of possibility of the human sciences (chief among them anthropology)?

What would—what could—an anthropology after ethnos / after “the human” look like? What if ...?

## *acknowledgments*

This much I learned: Every relation one has, offers a singular possibility to actualize one's being—one no other relation can offer. The powerful implication of this observation is that it is through relations that one is in the world. No relations, no self. Acknowledgments, then, the maps of relations they are, are akin to a map of one's history of being, of being in the world.

IT IS AN EXTRAORDINARY honor—a joy—to acknowledge the different relationships that have been constitutive of my being in the world (with the world) that have made this book possible.

The first time the idea for a book on anthropology after ethnos occurred to me was on an extremely cold Montreal winter day, in a terribly overheated room, where Dörte Bemme, Raad Fadaak, Kristin Flemons, Fiona Gedeon Achi, and Julianne Yip kept insisting that I better explain the difference between ethnography and fieldwork. Why would this difference matter for anthropology? What does “after ethnos” mean? How could one even fathom anthropology beyond culture and society? Or after the human? These were the early days of our thought collective. Adam Fleischman later joined us.

I want you all to know that I can't quite put in words the gratitude I feel for our clandestine conversations, for your complicity, for your challenges and your care, for your friendship. Your questions—and your visits—sustained me, sustained my sense of self. And your encouragements gave me the hope that some of the ideas that I found myself intrigued by could matter. I add that none of these ideas would have assumed the form they assume in this book without you.

Thank you.

Of similar importance was the friendship—and mentorship—of George Marcus. George, more than anyone else, has encouraged me to distinguish

fieldwork from ethnography (from the field-based study of an ethnos). George and I are working together on an edited volume on fieldwork after ethnos that I hope will soon be published—as a document of our friendship, as an exploration of possibilities that exceed whatever I write in this book.

I also want to mention here my heartfelt gratitude to Setrag Manoukian: your sense of poetry often carried me—and the elegant ease with which you render visible beauty in the unexpected often provided me with a shelter. I wish I had told you more often. And earlier.

Without Mara Eagle, without our countless conversations, the flights taken in this book would lack the wild intensities that only Mara can give to things. Our atlas project is the future.

I had the extraordinary fortune that friends near and far found *After Ethnos* provocative enough to organize podium discussion and workshops about the book when it was still in a manuscript state: George Marcus at UC Irvine; Vincanne Adams, Ian Withmarsh, and Sharon Kaufman at UCSF; Nancy Chen at UCSD; Mette Nordal Svendsen at Copenhagen; Janet Roitman, Nikolas Langlitz, and Miriam Ticktin at the New School; and Johannes Quack and Sandra Bärnreuther in Zürich.

Thank you for inviting me, for providing me with the opportunity to discuss the ideas outlined here with you and your colleagues, and for exposing me to your exceptional students who derailed me and caught me off foot more than once.

I also had the great fortune to discuss the manuscript—or some of the ideas contained therein—with Lawrence Cohen, Peter Redfield, Stephen Collier, Janina Kehr, Ellen Hertz, Townsend Middleton, Stefan Helmreich, Gregor Dobler, Laura Emdal Navne, Mie Seest Dam, Iben Mundbjerg Gjødsbøl, Katherine Lemons, and Yves Winter.

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Ian Withmarsh read several versions of the manuscript. And Ian's readings not only made the manuscript much better, he also encouraged me more than anyone else to push the implications and to follow them.

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I would also like to thank Fritz W. Kramer, who encouraged me to state loud and clear that classical modern ethnography is a matter of the past—just like classical modern art or classical modern architecture; Allan Young, for our daily conversations about an intellectually oriented anthropology; and Abe Fuks, for everything.

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Alberto “Willi” Sanchez and Tarek Elhaik are my best friends in the world. As Cicero knew: “Virtue creates the bond of friendship and preserves it. For in her is fidelity; and when she has raised her head and shown her own light in another, she moves towards it and in turn receives its beams; as a result love or friendship leaps into a flame; for both words are derived from a word meaning ‘to love.’ But love is nothing other than the great esteem and affection felt for him who inspires that sentiment.”

I love you.

Above all hovers my family, dead and alive. No relations, no self: you are my life. From beginning till end. Thank you. Thank you for everything.

*introduction*

— all of it —

Today, what is anthropology?

For most of the twentieth century, most anthropologists understood themselves as ethnographers. The art of anthropology, that was the careful, fieldwork-based description of faraway others—of how social structures secretly organized the living together of a given society, of how a people had endowed the natural world surrounding them with cultural meaning.

While the poetics and politics of ethnography changed dramatically over the course of a century, the basic equation of anthropology with ethnography remained so evident, so obvious, that the possibility of questioning it occurred to hardly anyone.

But today?

Beginning in the late 1990s, new, unanticipated lines of research have emerged that have little—in some cases nothing—in common with anthropology defined as ethnography, that is, the fieldwork-based study of an *ethnos* (Greek for “a people”). The idea for this book grounds in the observation that

one, perhaps unintended, effect of at least some of these new lines of research has been that they silently differentiated anthropology from ethnography—as if they differentiated a curiosity about the human from the fieldwork-based study of ethnos, of territorially imagined societies and their culture or social structure, their symbols and rituals and structures of belief.

*After Ethnos* is an attempt to bring the dissociation of anthropology from ethnography into view. It is an attempt to rethink anthropology—all of it—from the perspective of the “after.” What is more, it is an attempt to increase the intensity of the turbulences, the trouble that the after triggers. And it is an attempt to make available (at least some aspects of) the new/different anthropologies “after ethnos” it has allowed for.

— escapes (always) —

*After Ethnos* is a nonprogrammatic book.

My aim is not to argue that all of anthropology is “after” ethnos. Nor do I mean to suggest that there is a new, still emergent formation—the anthropology after ethnos. I have not sought to provide a programmatic statement of what an anthropology after ethnos—after ethnography, culture, society, place—might look like. Much of anthropology continues to revolve around just these concepts. Rather, the ambition (if this is not too ambitious a term) of *After Ethnos* is to look for escapes from the already thought and known, from scripts. My goal has been to look for opportunities to break free, to depart, to leave behind, to derail, to undermine. *After Ethnos* is about (the possibility of) lines of escape. The various escapes the book offers go in different, perhaps even mutually exclusive, directions.

However, I do not look for ways to go (arrive) somewhere.

— the human (deanthropologized) —

It was only very gradually that I began to understand that the differentiation of anthropology from ethnos also leads to a dissociation of anthropology from the human, that is, with the abstract, time- and place-independent figure of “Man” that was invented and stabilized in Europe between the 1630s and the 1830s and that has marked the historical condition of the possibility of a discipline called *anthropology*.

Culture, society, history, language, suffering, nation, meaning, symbol, ritual, myth, nature, subjectivity, the body: What if all the concepts anthro-

pologists have relied on, however implicitly, to stabilize “the human,” to set it apart, to create a separate human reality that would require its own science (anthropology), were actually inventions of a recent European past rather than human universals on which one would build “anthropological” knowledge?

Could one rethink anthropological research as the continuous practice of *deanthropologizing* anthropology? As an effort to let fieldwork accidents give rise to surprises in which humans—and anthropology and bacteria and robots and landscapes and snails and much more—are released from “the human”?

Not once and for all, as if there were some better, truer ontology waiting elsewhere (I am not an ontologist), but time and time again?

*After Ethnos* is an effort to think out loud about these questions. What is more, it is an attempt to wonder if anthropology could be a form of inquiry—an art—that always seeks to exceed its own condition of possibility.

— fieldwork (itself) —

*After Ethnos* is also an effort to differentiate fieldwork—understood as a technique of immersion into everyday life, as a methodological opportunity to let accidents give rise to the unanticipated—from ethnography, that is, from the fieldwork-based study of an ethnos.

I am an anthropologist, but not an ethnographer. I conduct fieldwork—but not ethnography.

Why and to what ends does one conduct fieldwork when one is not—no longer—conducting ethnography? What is fieldwork itself? What is its object—if any?

— form (exposure) —

When I then sought to enroll others in the project of imagining anthropologies after ethnos / the human, I ran into vehemence—at times furious—critique.

Why would you abandon ethnos? Why culture and society? Are you a neo-liberal? What is your politics? Why do you emphasize thought and philosophy? Isn't this anthropocentric? Don't these concepts transport the worst of the nineteenth century—reason, big white men, elitism, parochialism, colonialism? Why do you speak of the emergent? What is the aim of your focus on the new/different? Doesn't your approach reflect a modernist, linear philosophy

of time? Why—and to what ends—would one study movement or the “always new”? What would that even mean? Doesn’t space matter?

I found the questions troubling, the vehemence with which they often were articulated unsettling. Until, at one point or another, I began to understand that the reason for the critique I faced was not my project as such—not the push toward the “after”—but that my language, the vocabulary that I had available for myself (in many ways a reflection of the places of my education and thus of chance rather than of design) could not accommodate the anthropologies after ethnos / the human my critiques envisioned.

Differently put, I began to understand that the stakes of the “after” I sought to make available exceeded the vocabulary of possibilities I had relied on to make the after visible.

When I began to write up *After Ethnos*, I was determined to preserve—or capture—as much of that which exceeds me as I could. How, though? How to capture that which exceeds oneself? The response I eventually came up with I think of in terms of exposure: I wrote the first chapter, *on anthropology (free from ethnos)*, presented it on multiple occasions (some formal, many more informal)—and then meticulously documented (often times taped) the comments and challenges I found myself confronted with. Once back home, I worked through these challenges, time and again, baffled, angry, surprised, happy—until a set of texts emerged, texts that carry me into uncharted territories, that is, into terrains in which my initial language fails (or is challenged), failures (challenges) that give contours to stakes I wasn’t aware of when I set out to write. The outcome is a set of responses—of differentiations—that run somewhat diagonal to the arguments I offer in chapter 1, that explore its stakes differently (from different vantage points).

Next I wrote chapter 2, “*on the human (after “the human”)*”. I repeated the same process—exposure, taping comments/conversations, working through them, writing texts that would give contour to that which exceeded my initial formulations—while keeping in mind what I learned when I wrote the texts following chapter 1. Then came chapter 3, *on fieldwork (itself)*, and eventually chapter 4, *on the actual (rather than the emergent)*.

Each chapter, thus, is followed by a series of digressions—some short, others not exactly short—and differentiations that were triggered by the critical interventions of friends and interlocutors.

The final product is an untamed book, exuberant, provocative, fierce, funny (or so I hope), and always looking for lines of escape.

*After Ethnos*, while written by me, (hopefully) exceeds me in multiple ways.

What is anthropology once it is differentiated from ethnos?

What is anthropology when one gives up the once constitutive interest in spatially coded differences? If one bids farewell to culture, society, territory?

What is anthropology when one breaks not only with “the human” but as well with the idea that there is a separate human reality—humans as more than mere nature, as culture and/or society—that demands its own kind of science? When one breaks with the human without assuming that beyond the human there is some other, some truer reality? Without assuming that beyond the human lays some saving moral ground (nature)? That is, when one rejects ontology (or ontologies)?

Can an anthropology “after the human” be practiced at all?

What is fieldwork after it has been decoupled from ethnography? Is fieldwork the only form anthropological research can take?

Why and to what ends does one conduct anthropology after ethnos/the human? What is the purpose? Truth? Knowledge? Of what?

Today, what is anthropology? What is anthropological?