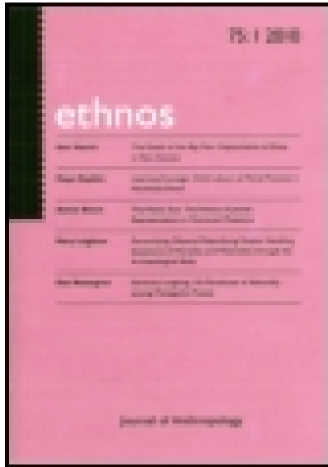
This article was downloaded by: [Alana Jelinek]
On: 27 April 2015, At: 02:22
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/retn20

A Response to the Issues Raised in the Special Edition of Ethnos

Alana Jelinek[a]
[a] University of Cambridge, UK
Published online: 17 Apr 2015.

CrossMark
Click for updates

To cite this article: Alana Jelinek (2015): A Response to the Issues Raised in the Special Edition of Ethnos, Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology, DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2015.1028567

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1028567

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be

independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015

AFTERWORD

A Response to the Issues Raised in the Special Edition of *Ethnos*

Alana Jelinek
University of Cambridge, UK

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015

ABSTRACT *An artist's response to the issues raised in the special edition of* Ethnos. *Using her own artwork to think through the issues raised, this afterword focuses on Levinas and a discussion around ethics and politics in both the artworld and anthropology. It ends with a discussion about storytelling or knowledge-formation and how Nature today serves the same rhetorical and narrative purpose that God has served in previous generations.*

KEYWORDS *Levinas, storytelling, genealogies of knowledge, art practice, ethics and politics*

This afterword creates a form of symmetry: the edition begins with art, *I wanna deliver a shark* by Ai Hasegawa and its challenge to nature and the ethics of both consumption and production, embodying the issues raised in this special edition of *Ethnos* and, with my afterword, it ends with an artist's response, thinking about the issues raised here through my own art practice. My practice engages directly with the main themes of this edition, namely ethics and nature. For the London artworld, not only does ethics contain the double meaning elaborated by Michael Lambek, as described in Adam Reed's contribution in this edition, but the positive meaning of the term has been synonymous with 'political' since the turn of the millennium. In the London artworld, the two concepts of ethics and politics are conveniently and knowingly intertwined. The term 'ethics' came to replace 'politics' when politics lost its lustre in the thrusting new world of the booming 1990s London art market. Arguably its recent centrality was a response to the

ETHNOS, 2015 (PP. 1–8), HTTP://DX.DOI.ORG/10.1080/00141844.2015.1028567
© 2015 Taylor & Francis

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015

perceived apolitics of 1980s and 1990s 'young British art' combined with the continuing need to disavow the old-fashioned concept of politics (Bishop 2006a; 2006b). Nevertheless, it would be misleading to characterise the artworld as having experienced an 'ethical turn' akin to that described by the contributors to this edition, as this phrase does not appear in the literature, unlike other 'turns'. Interestingly, the term 'politics' remains implicit in most of the contributions to this special edition.

I write from the perspective of London and, though the art market is global as are many instances of contemporary art practice, I do not claim universality when I write of the artworld. My analysis and comments are thoroughly grounded in the London artworld, its discourses, politics and economic structures.

Ethics in its other sense, meaning the general field in which criteria for human interaction are explored, is less a prevailing concern for the artworld than ethics as politics. Work that reflects on the general field includes Artur Żmijewski (for example, *80064* a film in which the faded ID-number of an Auschwitz survivor is re-tattooed onto the perhaps un-consenting aged survivor, 2005), Santiago Sierra (for example, *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo. Salamanca, Spain. December 2000*, a photograph of a live art event at which four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to have a line tattooed across their backs) and my own work, particularly *The Field* (2008–ongoing) which I have described as an art experiment in Levinasian ethics (Jelinek & Brown 2014). Sierra and Żmijewski foreground ethics by working in a negative ethical register which is assumed to be at odds with that of their audience. *The Field*, by contrast, is an attempt at engaging the other as Other thereby reflecting and contributing to the general field.

The Field is a 12.9 acre area of ancient woodland and meadow in Essex, England on the boundary of a once-grand estate. It is a location for art, conservation and outreach projects, but it is more than the mere physical host for such activities. In itself, *The Field* is a long-term, participatory, interspecies art project. It is a physical, geographical location at a specific moment in time with a set of ethical and aesthetic propositions attached. It is hoped that *The Field* affords participants the opportunity to engage mindfully and reflexively in relationships with other humans and other non-human species, both plant and animal. Behind it lies the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and his observation that Western knowledge (philosophy) has been based on an assumption and an alarming paradox: that knowledge is universal, while knowledge stems

from, and is confined to, the particularity of the Greco-European experience and tradition. Levinas understands that knowledge, based on this *philia*, a system of likeness, on the exchange of the same with the same, is a system of knowledge, of thought, of culture that inherently has a horror of the Other. This horror can only be minimised when the Other is assimilated as part of the same. The Other is not allowed to be other; it must be an extension of the self or the same (Critchley 1992: 31). Orientalism, primitivism and, in the case of animals, anthropomorphism can be understood as cultural manifestations of the extension of the self.

Levinas had informed my thinking, artwork and curating of exhibitions prior to *The Field*. Despite being a Talmudic scholar, his ethics are not predicated on religion. They seem extraordinarily secular given his commitment to Judaic thought. His ethics do not refer to morality. They are not about being a better person or having more empathy. Empathy suggests an imaginative leap which reduces the Other to the Same: the violence of 'we' (Hutchens 2004). Known for his metaethics, to my mind Levinas's ethics is fundamentally epistemological: we cannot know another and therefore we cannot reliably assume anything about them. Indeed, others cannot know ourselves and we cannot expect them to act as if they have this knowledge. For Levinas, we must always act and think with respect to the unknowableness of the other and is only when we act accordingly that we can have ethical engagements.

When I first encountered the work of contemporary anthropologists, I was struck by some of the disciplinary similarities with fine art practice, specifically anthropology's self-reflexivity. There were a number of philosophers that both disciplines read: Foucault in particular and Haraway. What surprised me was the absence of Levinas. To me, anthropology is all about the ethics of engaging with others as Other and yet it seems Levinas has made but a modest impression. (That said, he is name-checked but not unpacked by Adam Reed.) What is stranger perhaps is that he is often cited within the artworld, a discipline not particularly interested in ethics qua ethics.

For Levinas, any other, any other person is other as unknowably Other. I have somewhat misappropriated his work, stretching his understanding to make sense of my relationships with other cultures and engage ethically in my exploration of colonialism and neocolonialism. *The Field* is a further discourtesy to his intentions, especially in its inclusion of the non-human.

In reading the ethnographies presented in this edition of *Ethnos*, I am reminded of my own journey via *The Field* around the concept of Nature. It was both the experience of working on *The Field* and working with anthropol-

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015

ogists that has shifted my understanding of the Nature–Culture divide. At the beginning of the project in 2008, I had considered Art, Science, Religion, subjects one studies at school and university and all man-made things (material and non-material) as culture. All else was nature. It was with this frame that I approached the field site. Despite being on the perimeter of a once-grand country estate, all I could see was trees and birds, none of which I could identify. These, I understood, as Nature and I felt self-conscious about inserting culture, that is Art, into the context despite (or because of) a history of Land Art also informing the project. I could not see that, despite the woodland's ancientness, the majority of trees had been planted by the landowners who once lived there, being coppiced hornbeam and hawthorn, interspersed by oak standards and a line of cherry laurel used possibly as cover for game birds. I did not know then that the Romans brought rabbits to Britain (so in my view culture, not nature) or that both roe and fallow deer were brought to Britain by subsequent rulers. I thought they belonged and so they were nature. If they were brought by man, they become culture in my personal taxonomy. I was so self-conscious about the nature–culture divide, the first allotments we drew up were in the shapes of Islamic tiles; being based in maths Islamic tile patterns are therefore, to my mind, Culture writ large.

I recognise the place of an Abrahamic God in this concept of Nature and, I would argue, God is present in all the ethnographies presented here in this edition of *Ethnos*. This is not to say that Nature and God are the same thing in anyone's mind, least of all the informants in these ethnographies, but that Nature has replaced the concept of God in its capacity to act as a baseline or universal reference point. Just as we need(ed) the concept of God so we invented him, we need the concept of Nature. But my point goes deeper than this. I wish to consider the idea of how knowledge is formed, to consider how we collect and frame our knowledge, as all knowledge, in my view, is ultimately storytelling.

Demonstrating this idea in 2013, I wrote and published a novel from the point of view of an object in a museum's collection. The novel was an attempt at exploring the idea of collections and collecting from the naive but not unintelligent position of an object that has been collected. In addition to the various observations about living and historical collectors and the historical facts about the object narrating the stories, the novel explored the idea of the 'ambient ether', which I conceived as the stories that comprise discourse in any one place and at any one time. In the novel, *The Fork's Tale, as Narrated by Itself* (Jelinek 2013), I gave discourse substance, making it another set of

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015

things that a collector will collect, both substantial and part of the ether. All humans were conceived therefore as collectors in that all humans collect stories and things.

Through *The Fork's Tale*, I began to explore the idea that all forms of collecting, including collections of knowledge or storytelling, are based on previous patterns of collecting. By the time I came to write it, I had already begun to look at knowledges and storytelling, how some people choose to collect and pass on one type of knowledge or stories while others pick up different ones even when they are exposed to a wide range. From 2010 until 2012, I worked with colleagues at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, to explore what they understood they knew about the Fijian 'cannibal forks' in the collection. I listened to and collected knowledge from a wide range of people, including anthropologists and scholars as well as front of house staff and museum technicians (*Tall Stories: Cannibal Forks 2010*, *2012*). What was interesting to me was not so much the truth of the stories (I continue to believe this is an impossible quest), but the types of stories recollected by different people. It was clear to me that knowledge, the stories we choose to seek out and pass on, is a kind of self-portrait. We are, all of us, exposed to a wide range of stories, but only some are retained, recollected and distributed.

I am an atheist, like many involved with *The Field*, but I am not a secularist, unlike most. I like religion and I accept it as part of our deeply embedded storytelling and therefore our knowledge traditions. I can see how, for me, Nature means/meant what God put there, as distinct from what Man does and I think like this despite being an atheist. There are stories and ways of narrating that have deep roots and these form schema onto which other knowledge is placed. Knowledge here includes ideas about Nature, both scientific and lay. That evolution is understood as progress even by some evolutionary biologists is, I would argue, an artefact of the Abrahamic religions. There is nothing inherent in the concept of evolution that requires this teleological flavour, the understanding of evolution as progress towards something (that something being Man). Nevertheless, evolution by natural selection resonates with ideas of progress because, I would argue, it has been overlaid on a schema created from older forms of storytelling, those derived from stories of progress from darkness to light and chaos to Man. Thomas (1991) describes how ideas and projects of precolonial cultures are a significant factor in the success or failures of the various aspects of the colonial project. I would argue similarly, that knowledge (stories) only has salience when it is overlaid on schema that

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015

already exist and that this operates on both an individual level and a societal one. It is a deep storytelling, a way of organising stories, stemming from the Abrahamic religions at the heart of Western culture that informs how knowledge is arranged and framed in the West (for want of a better term).

The idea that Nature means what God put there as distinct from what Man does also pervades the thinking of Adam Reed's informants. There is Man and there is everything else. Man is a special case in the world. Further, not only is Man a special case, different from all other animals, but Man is bad: a concept as familiar as Original Sin. Again in common with Christianity, they offer a way to overcome the badness of man: we must be more in touch with our in-born natures, like children. Nature and God are seemingly interchangeable at the level of schema, though not interchangeable as overt content. The content is clearly (and perhaps avowedly) secular. The fact that the animal protection informants evangelise, believing it is both possible and proper to convert others to their way of thinking, further evidences the existence of narrative artefacts derived from other, older forms of storytelling and knowledge-formation. This contrasts with the informants of both Katharine Dow and Charlotte Faircloth who are slightly different in their relationship to Nature. They both share a reliance on Nature and evolution as the most correct baseline informing their decisions about how to live. Instead of being written in the stars or in God's heart, our behaviours and identities are predestined by genes. Structured like this we can see how older stories about an Abrahamic God serve as placeholders for their concepts of nature and evolution. Adherence to what is natural, adherence to Nature, is charged with moral authority because it is God (-like). When Dow and Boydell observe in the introduction to this special issue that 'in contemporary Britain, nature seems also to have become laden with moral authority and ethical potency', I would argue that this is because Nature has replaced God in a form of storytelling that has deep roots. It is this elision of God with Nature that accounts perhaps for some of the concept's polysemy. It may also account for Nature's resistance to 'flattening' despite modern hybrid monsters and technology.

Mascha Gugganig's writing about genetic engineering (GE) of taro in Hawaii elucidates Nature as God from a different angle. Native Hawaiians are, in general, Christian but their Christianity is nuanced with a Polynesian sense of w*hakapapa*. Nature is a concept differently understood by those without Hawaiian w*hakapapa*. As humans born of *Haloa* born of *Ho'ohokukalani* they are definitely part of Nature: no exceptionalism. Reading this paper piqued my own sense of transgression around GE. Though I do not share the sacred-

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015

ness of understanding that accompanies those with *whakapapa*, I realise that I too have a sense of God in Nature with regard species-specific DNA. I realise that it is vitally important to me to preserve the distinctions between the building blocks of different families or orders, if not species. I am well aware of the argument that GE is for the left what Climate Science is to the right, that its rejection will mean the needless death of countless millions, nevertheless there is something visceral in my feelings of rejection which I believe I recognise in the informants of Gugganig. That *something* seems close to a faith in the Natural Order of Things, or God by another name. Of course, for those on the left, there is also the issue of trust in corporations and systems of privatised knowledge (patents) neither of which have traditionally been associated with the common good. Nevertheless it is the very depth of abject feeling towards GE that alerts me to something else going on. I envy the Native Hawaiian their rhetorical, moral and political authority to end the experiments on Hawaiian taro.

I must highlight and own some of the differences between my discipline, fine art practice, and that of the assumed readership of this journal, anthropology. Having worked with anthropologists for the past six years through my research with the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge, and having contributed to anthropology journals and therefore having been subject to readers' comments from anthropologists, I am aware that my writing might inspire frustration in some. For some readers, as this is not anthropology, it must be the writing of an informant. In anthropology, knowledge is created through a process in which numbers of informants are brought together and their testaments compared in the hope that trends emerge and singularities noted but dismissed. All informants are treated with equal scepticism and equal respect. This is not true of either critical writing within fine art practice or within history of art. Here, knowledge is created in reference to others who write or make art and rests on a bedrock of acknowledged experts. I would argue that anthropology works analogously at the theoretical end of the spectrum; a point illustrated here in contributors' references to Strathern, Ingold or Descola, for example. My hope in writing this afterword is that it is read, not as an informant writing from a singular point of view in need of contextualisation amongst others of my kind, but as one whose singularity is their contribution. I make no claims to having proven that knowledge or storytelling is a type of self-portrait or that Nature really has replaced all that the concept of God used to contain. As with any artist's contribution,

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015

I simply offer these ideas here and these ideas may or may not resonate with my audience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

Bishop, Claire (ed.). 2006a. *Participation*. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery.
——. 2006b. The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents. *Artforum*, 44(6):178–183.
Critchley, Simon. 1992. *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Hutchens, B. C. 2004. *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum.
Jelinek, Alana. 2013. *The Fork's Tale, as Narrated by Itself*. London: LemonMelon.
Jelinek, Alana & Juliette Brown. 2014. The Field: An Art Experiment in Levinasian Ethics. In *Living Beings: Perspective on Interspecies Engagements*, edited by Penny Dransart. London: Bloomsbury.
Thomas, Nicholas. 1991. *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Downloaded by [Alana Jelinek] at 02:22 27 April 2015