



#Review: After Ethnos

written by Shaheed Tayob

October, 2019



After Ethnos is a philosophically sophisticated provocation and inspiration towards a new mode of anthropological analysis that breaks free from the classic conflation of anthropology with ethnography and of ethnography with fieldwork. Tobias Rees proposes an anthropology that moves beyond the taken for granted reliance on the category of the human as it emerged in 18th century enlightenment theory. Rejecting “the human” and “man” as the object of analysis means displacing the cognate concepts of “culture,” “society,” and “the social” for explaining “the human,” and rethinking ethnography as the more or less objective



scientific method of this endeavor. For Rees, discarding these flawed paradigms leads towards a conception of “a philosophically inclined anthropology” (chapter 1) as “an anthropology ‘of’ the human/after ‘the human’” (34). He characterizes this new mode of anthropological enquiry as “a practice of fieldwork-based immersion that revolves around the discovery of the unanticipated”(34) which forces a reconsideration of the category of the human.

The end-goal is not a new paradigm or theory, but rather a new sensibility which releases humans, the world, and philosophy from their mooring in 18th century enlightenment humanism.

Rees therefore provincializes the 18th century concept of the human as a “recently invented concept that emerged in Europe about 250 years ago and that became subsequently universalized” (40). His anthropology “‘of’ the human/ after ‘the human’” aims to reveal instances that “escape” this enlightenment conception of the human (40). However, he is suspicious of Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) and the so-called ontological turn, that seek to replace one over-determined conception of the human, with another “supposedly better” alternative (41). Rather, he proposes anthropology as “an analysis of movement/in terms of movement” as an *exposure* “of oneself, of one’s analytical categories, and of the established concepts of the human that are built into these categories.” Fieldwork as *exposure* entails “immersing oneself into scenes of everyday life in order to let the chance events that make up fieldwork/research give rise to an unanticipated, unforeseen difference” (41) as a continuous process, not towards a new closure, but as “singular openings” through which “the very condition of possibility of anthropology” can be reinvented (42).

Rees questions the association of fieldwork with ethnography credited to Malinowski who “likened anthropology to the arts” in order to grasp the “native point of view” (79). Contrary to anthropology as the study of difference in place with regard to far-away Others, he proposes attention to “difference in time”. He retains an emphasis on fieldwork, however, now as “an artful-experimental-



technique” that “produce[s] surprise,” (80) and is hence centered around “accidents that have the power to disrupt the taken for granted” (82). Following Deleuze in search of the actual Rees thus finds a place for anthropology and fieldwork as an attempt to capture the irreducible singularity that reigns “in the forms of recognitions, of openings, of surprises, of discoveries, of derailments” (104) that may reveal the cracks and fissures in established ways of knowing and viewing the world.

After Ethnos is admirable in that it reveals the fallacy of a positivist mode of anthropology that deals with fieldwork data as “facts” and which posits different moral values or ontologies as the basis for research.

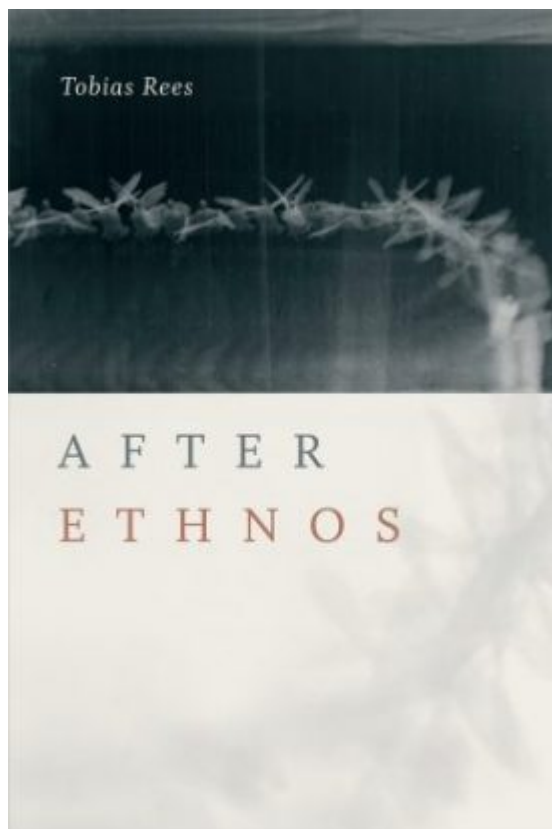
Indeed, as Edward Said made so clear, studying the Other is also always about producing the Other (Said 1978). However, a number of issues in Rees’ argument necessitate caution.

Firstly, his analysis of the 18th century category of the human as a “recently invented concept” relies on a very particular history of the Enlightenment that runs completely against Rees’s own caution against epochal analyses – expressed later in the book – as “clear-cut ruptures that divide the world...into...before and after” (95). Indeed, as many scholars have argued the genealogy of humanism as it emerged during the 18th century enlightenment was novel, but not totally unprecedented. For example, thirteenth century Maghrebi sociologist Ibn khaldun laid the groundwork for many ‘modern’ theories of state formation and society. Similarly, the ontological rupture between humans and animals was not unknown either. For example, Ibn Tufayl’s twelfth century philosophical tale, Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, is a reflection on God, humans and animals that clearly articulates an ontological divide but which does not authorize a relation of absolute domination (Goodman 1972). Rather than relying on the notion of an epochal rupture, which produces the idea of western specificity and particularity, is the important work on the transactional production of modern categories of thought through imperial encounters (van der Veer 2001; Chidester 1996).



A more thorough genealogy of modern categories reveal that they are not as “invented” as Rees argues.

Rees’s emphasis on “surprise” and “movement” also deserves critical reflection. Both notions are necessarily tied to a particular location and set of assumptions. For example, a racist may well be surprised by the intelligence of a black woman, but that hardly counts as a critical insight. The notion of surprise that Reese relies on is entirely dependent on the very categorization of Enlightenment



humanism which he riles against. The work of revealing the violence of 18th century humanism and its devastating effects in the colonies and to the environment is well established (Cesaire 2001; Haraway 2008).

Contrary to Rees’s assumption, 18th century enlightenment humanism may have been universalized through Western philosophy and conquest, but as Talal Asad’s work illustrates, it has not necessarily been hegemonic (Asad 1986; Asad 2003). Paying attention to the instances that escape the Western Enlightenment conception of the human does not necessarily require Deleuzian philosophy nor the heroic impulse to *exposure* and *capture* which Reese proposes.

In fact, it is precisely the heroism of Rees conception of anthropology and fieldwork that is most concerning. Enlightenment humanism and the development of anthropology were not merely conceptual problems, but were intimately tied to the desire to know and conquer. To argue for the complex history of knowledge production as a conceptual problem, devoid of conquest, is a mistake. It allows Reese to articulate a new kind of heroism, this time tied to a desire to *capture* the irreducible openness of becoming. However recent anthropological work on, say,



giving and receiving charity in Cairo has shown how alternative conceptions of the human exist alongside the shrines and mosques in the city (Mittermaier 2019). Conceiving of human and non-human animals as all subject to the mercy and grace of God provides a discursive and embodied way of being in the world that authorizes practices of care and giving without the heroic impulse to change the world, nor with an over determined sense of the human as autonomous individual bounded self. Producing these insights requires careful attention to the discursive and material constellations through which everyday life unfolds. It entails *humility in learning from others* not to get at a “native point of view” but to allow different conceptions of the human to emerge. Conceptions that both unsettle the fallacies of Enlightenment humanism and of hegemonic Western determinism.

References

- Asad, Talal. 1986. “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 141–64. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cesaire, Aime. 2001. “Discourse on Colonialism,” In *Discourse on Colonialism*, 31–78. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Chidester, David. 1996. *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Haraway, Donna J. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Goodman, Lenn Evan. 1972. *Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*.



New York: Twayne Publishers Inc.

Mittermaier, Amira. 2019. *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

van der Veer, Peter. 2001. *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press,

[Rees, Tobias.2018. *After Ethnos*. Durham: Duke University Press.](#)

Featured [image](#) by [Daniel Olah](#) (Courtesy of [Unsplash](#))