

Introduction:

Nature and Ethics Across Geographical, Rhetorical and Human Borders

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Keywords: nature, ethics, kinship, gender, human-animal relations, technology

The nature-culture dichotomy is perhaps one of the most critical legacies of anthropological thought. Nature has long occupied a position of vital importance in the way in which people are understood to imagine their own and others' worlds. Given this, it is not surprising that nature has been employed by anthropologists as an analytical heuristic and, historically, as an ultimate reference point from which to make sense of human behaviour. Nature is, also, a concept with great power and rhetorical weight for the people anthropologists encounter in the field, not least in the Western world. Diverse examples from moral panics about genetically modified foods, to the spread of government-enforced waste recycling schemes, to concerns about 'reproductive tourism' show that claims about nature are never politically, emotionally or morally neutral. For many, notions of naturalness structure ethical choices, both in terms of how people live (or want to live) their lives and in guiding our sense of right and wrong, justice and truth.

In 2012, artist and designer Ai Hasegawa exhibited her award-winning piece, 'I wanna deliver a shark...' at the Royal College of Art's *Design for the Real World* exhibition in London. The main exhibit was an anatomical model of a human uterus with a shark foetus inside it (Figure 1). Hasegawa explains in her own words:

This project approaches the problem of human reproduction in an age of over-population and environmental crisis. With potential food shortages and a population of nearly nine¹ billion people, would a new mother consider incubating and giving birth to an endangered species such as a shark, tuna or dolphin? This project introduces a new argument for giving birth to our food to satisfy our demands for nutrition and childbirth and discusses some of the technical details of how that might be possible. (Ai Hasegawa's website, accessed 19th February 2014)

Hasegawa's speculative design work proffers a radical rethinking of the human exploitation of natural resources, it razes the boundaries between species and presents a fundamental challenge to our ideas about motherhood. The idea of a woman giving birth to a shark, which she might later eat, or which might even eat her, pushes forcefully at the borders of the natural and the ethical. Like the papers in this special issue, Hasegawa's work points to questions with enormous significance: what counts as (un)natural? What happens when we cross species boundaries? What are the consequences of playing with life and death? What are humans' responsibilities to the natural world? Her work also reminds us that every scientific and medical innovation has a history and that often even the most challenging technologies have become normalised.



Figure 1. 'I wanna deliver a shark...', Ai Hasegawa, 2012.

Photo by artist, with permission.

As Hasegawa's work viscerally reminds us, describing something as unnatural marks it as uncanny, dubious and even taboo. This is not to say that naturalness is treated as unproblematically ethical: it still has its teeth and claws, yet there is a strong implication in contemporary representations of nature within the Western world that it is, at least, fundamentally authentic. In Western epistemologies, nature is relationally defined, often paired dichotomously with culture, and the relationship between them shifts, as culture controls nature, yet nature is prior to and underlies culture. The relationship is not static but, rather, a continuous process of transformation, a changing hierarchy in which meanings shift depending on the formulation of control.

In *After Nature*, an analysis of kinship and nature in the late twentieth century England, Marilyn Strathern (1992) shows the continuous tension between nature and culture in modern thought, as society is framed as descending from nature but at the same time is different from nature because it is socialised through relations. This opposition is productive, as it makes both knowable: they play off one another as they illuminate and mask the other. This complex relationship Strathern terms a 'merographic connection': domains can be part of something else, but nothing is ever a self-contained whole, as it can only be re-described from another perspective, thereby taking on, however slightly, the character of something else. Nature, in this way of thinking, is particularly significant because it has the capacity to act as a baseline or universal reference point. In contemporary Britain, nature seems also to have become laden with moral authority and ethical potency. For example, we are used to the idea that naturalness is something to be strived for, whether in selecting baby food or assessing beauty. This is of course a particularly middle-class obsession, but we would suggest that this is all the more reason to take it seriously, since, as Strathern also points out, the middle class dominates politics, media and the public sector, so their² ideas, including about the ethics of nature, are disproportionately influential in mainstream public discourse.

In *After Nature*, Strathern (1992) predicted that, with increasingly minute interventions into biological processes, from genetics and embryology to pharmacology and agriculture, nature would lose its ability to ground fundamental claims about who we are, how we are related to each other and how we should live. She proposed that exposing the complexities of nature through its technologisation and commodification would cause it to become 'flattened'. Nature would, in other words, lose its ontological and moral purchase. Meanwhile, morality and ethics would become increasingly individualised because of a lack of stable reference points in a world where biotechnology has shaken former certainties.

This special issue responds to Strathern's provocative predictions by considering a diverse range of contemporary relationships to nature over twenty years after her momentous speculations. Nature is undoubtedly a polysemous concept with particular local, individual and contextual meanings, yet despite this elasticity its ability to act as an ultimate reference point seems to have become stronger, rather than weaker. The issue will focus on nature's moral force and examine the connections and disjunctures between nature and ethics across cultural, species, geographic and ethical boundaries. The papers will show that, while nature remains an ambiguous and risky force, we are in a time in which it can still act as an

ultimate reference point and boundary-marker, and that it is, vitally, invested with profound ethical authority.

The papers in this collection examine how working directly with the natural world (re)produces specific conceptions of the natural and the ethical, as well as the ways in which people make competing and apparently contradictory claims on and for nature, sometimes within the same or geographically and culturally close locations. They all reflect on how an ethicised nature – that is, a formulation of nature which assumes it has a fundamentally ethical or good character – bears on how people understand themselves, their relations to others (human and non-human) and on the connections between people, as well as the role of a naturalised ethics in structuring relationships between people, the natural world and other living beings (see also Ingold 2000).

The papers in this special issue examine the connections and disjunctures between nature and ethics across cultural, species, geographic and moral boundaries. They provide a comparative perspective on the varied and complex ways in which nature and discourses of naturalness pervade people's lives at all levels, from the intimacies of familial relationships to the production and consumption of food, the gendered division of labour, trans-species relations, discourses of science and truth, perceptions of the landscape and the politics of emotion and identity.

Nature in Anthropological Theory and Ethnography

Our understanding of the concept of nature has evolved alongside anthropology itself. As Kirsten Hastrup (2013: 1) has written, 'Theoretical advancement in anthropology today is precipitated by new insights into the deep-seated entanglements of natural and social, of human and non-human, and of organic and non-organic forms. Through such entanglements, worlds emerge simultaneously as empirical and analytical objects'. She describes a shift from the work to 'dismantle the dualism' of nature and society done in the 1990s, especially in the work of Descola and Pálsson (1996), towards actually moving 'beyond' the dualism. This attempt to move beyond the nature-culture dichotomy is epitomised by Philippe Descola's recent effort to take a 'Big-Time Thinker' approach to this problem. The aim of *Beyond Nature and Culture*, as stated in the title, is commendable, but we wonder if it is really possible to move beyond any dualism whilst still working within its terms and we remain unconvinced by Descola's proposition that a better understanding of human life lies in tracing collective

'schemas' (see Fitzgerald 2013 for a cogent critique on this and related points). Further, we would add that, in getting caught up in the traffic in nature between ourselves, anthropologists are in danger of losing sight of the ways in which ideas of nature evolve amongst *other* people (i.e. non-anthropologists), with whose ideas we are, after all, supposedly most concerned.

The following review, which is not intended to be an extensive overview of nature as a concept in anthropological theory, but to provide the reader with a refresher of the extensive conversation over the last 25 years, follows three strands of the debates which are most relevant to the papers in this special issue: kinship and gender, environmentalism and human-animal relations. However, it should be clear that debates about nature touch most aspects of anthropological theory and research. Two common problems for social theorists grappling with ideas of nature and the natural are, firstly, the fact that nature is a powerful rhetorical resource for making moral and political claims and secondly, the tenacity of the nature-culture distinction in many folk models, both historical and contemporary.

At the turn of the 20th century, anthropological references to the 'natural' conveyed a universalising approach to analysing the structure and function of social roles and relationships. This is perhaps most forcefully exemplified by the idea of a universal biological sexual division of labour that relegated women into caring roles at home and reproductive work while men dominated the public sphere of the market and politics. This naturalised division of labour, rooted in fundamental assumptions about the natural nature of sexual reproduction, structured anthropological thinking, so that it seemed plausible to divide social worlds into dichotomous domains of public/private; production/reproduction and work/home. Subsequently, anthropologists, including most notably David Schneider (1984) and Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako (1987), demonstrated that the apparent universality of nature in anthropological analysis and the corresponding social relationships were, in fact, projections of specific Western knowledge practices.

Throughout the 1990s feminist scholars actively deconstructed the relationship between biological universals of sex and gender, elucidating the 'social construction' of biology. Ideas that women, by virtue of biology, were geared and built for roles in the private, domestic and reproductive spheres have been systemically challenged as ethnography showed that these categories and logics do not hold firm across space and time (see, for example, Strathern 1980; Moore 1988). In place of biological sexual difference translating into universal sex categories and roles, gender was no long *a priori*, predictable or fixed, but rather, a symbolically constituted social construction resulting in naturalised difference and inequality

(Moore 1988; MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Atkinson and Errington 1990). Gender was defined as the 'cultural elaboration of the meaning and significance of the natural facts of biological differences between women and men' (Moore 1999: 149). Collier and Yanagisako (1987) further advanced this deconstructive move by questioning the biological 'facts' of sex. Judith Butler (1990) then showed that biological sex is actually an effect of gender and that gender codes what we take to be the natural basis for differences between men and women.

Parallel to these feminist critiques has been the emergence of the new kinship studies, which have drawn on ethnographic accounts of the fast-moving world of reproductive and other biotechnologies. New kinship studies built on the foundational work of David Schneider (1980 [1968]; cf. 1984), which illustrated how the 'order of nature' and 'the order of law' are merged in anthropological kinship thinking. Following on from this, and alongside the feminist critique of biological universals, the idea of 'natural facts' came to be recognised as a specific Western folk model. Strathern (1992) subsequently examined the many definitions of nature and the complex way in which it is implicated in the structure and (re)production of Euro-American and anthropological knowledge practices. This has led to a much-needed examination of the substance and coding of nature, which was previously taken for granted (Franklin and McKinnon 2001).

A key development in anthropological theory in recent decades has been the thorough reconsideration of nature as a variable, contingent category that encompasses many different meanings, not just in the contrasts between Western and non-Western societies (Descola and Pálsson 1996; Strathern 1980), but also within Western societies (Franklin 2003; Franklin et al 2000; Gould 2005; James 1993; Keller 2008; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Strathern 1992, 2003; Thompson 2001, 2002; Tsing 1994; Yanagisako and Delaney 1994).

Sarah Franklin (1997: 57) argues that understanding the idiom of naturalness is essential to grasping Euro-American cultures; this is particularly acute given the close connections that she identifies between anthropologists' own ideas about nature and what they find in their ethnographies of other cultures. For Yanagisako and Delaney, nature picked up where Christianity left off after the decline of institutionalised religion in western European and North American societies:

[W]hat was left was a rule-governed Nature, Nature stripped of its cosmological moorings and therefore presumably generalizable to all peoples. Rather than the dichotomy between the natural and supernatural,

what was left was “nature” vs. what man did with it – namely, “culture”. This move obscured the specificity of the concept of “nature” (1994: 4; see also Sahlins 1996).

Through history and in different places, nature has had different forms, meanings and moral valences (see Abram and Lien 2011). But, nature does not only shift because of the vagaries of history – polysemy is an inherent part of its own nature and scholars in anthropology and cultural studies have noted the many meanings that it has in the English language alone (Cronon 1996; Franklin 1997: 54; Keller 2008: 118; Schneider 1980 [1968]; Williams 1983). As Keller (2008) argues, blurring nature’s sometimes disparate meanings is an inherent feature of Euro-American thinking about this concept. In the twenty-first century, nature comes clothed in the vestiges of the multiple meanings it has acquired through history. We argue that this ability to encompass multiple meanings is important in giving nature its potency, and that this grows with the increasing meanings it takes on. Nature’s specific potency in Euro-American thinking is due to the fact that, amongst its many meanings, it is a grounding or baseline, and thus fundamentally knowable, but *at the same time* a transcendent and cosmological principle that is ultimately unfathomable, not least because of its ever-expanding meanings.

While anthropological attention towards nature has largely emerged from the study of kinship, reproduction and gender, environmentalism, and the meanings that nature has for people concerned about the future of the natural world, has come to receive attention from anthropologists (see Berglund 1998; Choy 2011; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Dow 2010a; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Milton 1993). This has occurred alongside the environmentalist movement’s increasing influence on Western, and to some extent global, politics, economics and culture. Scholars of environmentalism have shown how the contingent meanings of nature may be employed to support particular claims and effect specific aims by those working in this movement and with animals (Thompson 2002; Yearley 1993). Some scientists have also sought to reflect the impact of our deepening awareness of anthropogenic environmental change by labelling our current age as the ‘Anthropocene’ (see Latour 2013).

Eeva Berglund did fieldwork with environmental activists in various projects in one town in Germany, providing a valuable illustration of the kind of work such activists do and the meanings they place on nature and the natural world. Her ethnography demonstrates that, rather than taking concepts such as science and nature as universal constants in our analysis, they should be treated as contingent

categories of thought that are used for particular purposes and with specific effects. As she says, Euro-Americans 'mix and match nature and culture even as we struggle to be consistent in setting boundaries between them. We still act (and agonise) with nature in mind ... it is upon the power that enables the establishing of those boundaries, that anthropologists are able to comment' (1998: 13).

In the UK, at least, what was once called the green movement has been re-conceptualised, and re-marketed, as 'ethical living'. A turn towards conscious reflection on how we live our lives has emerged alongside the increasing currency of environmental thinking in culture and politics (see also Grove-White 1993). As William Cronon writes:

Popular concern about the environment often implicitly appeals to a kind of naïve realism for its intellectual foundation, more or less assuming that we can pretty easily recognize nature when we see it and thereby make uncomplicated choices between natural things, which are good, and unnatural things, which are bad. Much of the moral authority that has made environmentalism so compelling as a popular movement flows from its appeal to nature as a stable external source of nonhuman values against which human actions can be judged without much ambiguity. (1996: 25-6)

The importance of ideas about nature and the natural world in contemporary life has been particularly successfully demonstrated by anthropological studies of relationships between people and non-human animals. The study of humans' relations with other animals is as old as the discipline, not least because so many early ethnographies were located in communities which relied on hunting and subsistence agriculture to survive and theorists have long paid attention to the symbolism of non-human animals, as in the long-standing debate on totemism. Lévi-Strauss' contribution to this debate was to move it 'toward the intellect' in his suggestion that totemic animals (and plants) are 'good to think' (1962: 89). Particular groups identify themselves with specific animals not because of their economic utility, he said, but their symbolic and metonymic efficacy.

In a review of work on human-animal relations in anthropology, Molly Mullin (1999) notes the relationship between trends in anthropological thinking and the treatment of animals in ethnography. She sees the 'windows and mirrors' approach as a productive one, and makes the related point that, just as ethnographic accounts of Western kinship can help expose some of the underlying assumptions of anthropologists that have informed kinship theory, ethnographic explication of the

ways that people think about the other species in their lives similarly reflect the preoccupations of social science. So, an interest in identity politics and reflexivity in the social sciences along with a concurrent increase in the influence of environmentalist discourse has come alongside a mushrooming of attention paid to the relations between people and animals.

As Rebecca Cassidy (2002: 129) demonstrates in her analysis of human-horse relations in England's Newmarket racing society, animals demonstrate the 'flexibility' of how people use analogical connections in the making of culture (see also Edwards 2000), yet they are not simply passive signifiers of human self-obsession, but dynamic agents. She shows this in the way that ideas about horses both reflect and reproduce ideas about the 'natural order' in Newmarket. As this suggests, animals are not only good to think with, but also good to act with. As Cassidy shows, the animals that human groups identify with may be thought of as family at one moment and an alien species at another and such ideas can inform and reproduce particular ideologies about gender, class and reproduction in humans.

The global call to 'Save the Whale' was one of the earliest examples of environmentalist campaigning and remains metonymic of the movement, so it is a useful illustration of many of the key features of humans' contemporary relations with non-human animals. At the advent of the whaling industry, these marine mammals were largely seen as economic resources to be harvested for profit. Now, although there are of course divergent views within the anti-whaling camps (Stoett 1997: 105; cf. Einarsson 1993), they are popularly seen as hapless victims of the excesses of human industry which we humans have an ethical responsibility to conserve and protect. Writing about anti-whaling views, Peter Stoett states, 'Environmental issues have ethics at their heart: questions of what constitutes proper human behaviour and proper relations between people and nature' (1997: 108). What is particularly interesting about the global Save the Whale campaign is its successful establishment of an *ethical* imperative to protect cetaceans, which has been concurrent with the shift from green politics to ethical living (Dow 2010a, 2010b). As with other strands of the environmentalist movement like organic foods and recycling, this has rested on the association of certain objects *and actions* with nature.

The Anthropology of Ethics

Questions of ethics, morality and the good have come to prominence within anthropology in recent years. As James Laidlaw has put it in his recent book on the anthropology of ethics, 'Everywhere human conduct is pervaded by an ethical

dimension – by questions of the rightness and wrongness of actions, of what we owe to each other, of the kind of person we think we are or aspire to be – so it is an inescapable part of what anthropologists study’ (2013: 1; see also Lambek 2010; Faubion 2011). As some of the leading figures of this movement make clear, however, this should not be seen as anthropology suddenly discovering ethics, but more a turning up of the volume on the ethical so that we are more explicit about its ubiquity in everyday social life. Laidlaw (2013: 2) makes a useful parallel with the study of gender in anthropology and expresses the hope that, like gender, ethics will progress from being seen as a discrete subject of enquiry or sub-discipline towards being recognised by the whole discipline as something that pervades all human thought and conduct and so should not be heuristically divorced from the rest of social life or studied only by moral philosophers.

Joel Robbins (2012: para. 4) has sounded a worthwhile note of caution in the recent ‘ethical turn’ in anthropology by warning that if we are to make the most of it, anthropology ‘will need to develop some more sustained intellectual debates and some more established (though not necessarily compatible) theoretical positions that set out central issues a large number of contributors find it useful to address’. One of the strongest arguments of this blossoming body of literature is the point that anthropology is well equipped to study ethical speech and action because of its method and mode of enquiry. Ethnography allows us to capture the ubiquity of ethics in social life, as well as the complex and contingent interactions between social relations, moral edicts, political-economic structures and individual judgements that inform ethical life and self-fashioning.

One of the major points of interest in the development of this field within anthropology in recent years has centred on debates about how and where to locate ‘freedom’. Laidlaw (2002; 2013) has made a strong case for abandoning the recently fashionable yet rather strange and contradictory concept of ‘agency’. Drawing particularly on Foucault’s work on the care of the self, which has been a major influence in the anthropology of ethics, Laidlaw emphasises the point that, while the ethical forms and codes on which ethical subjects can draw are based on their particular cultural and social milieux, they consciously reflect on their choices and actions and this is, for Laidlaw, the action of freedom. James D. Faubion (2011) similarly makes the point that ethical subjects are in a constant process of self-fashioning, taking up shifting subject positions, which must be constantly maintained, while Joel Robbins (2012) has noted the need to take account of both the ‘socially given’ and the ‘idiosyncrasies’ which subjects develop as part of their particular projects of self-fashioning.

Michael Lambek (2008, 2010) is similarly influenced by Foucault's work on ethics, though he also draws on Aristotelian virtue ethics, from which he takes the concept of *phronesis*, which he translates as practical judgement. Lambek argues against the concept of freedom in favour of judgement as 'the fulcrum of everyday ethics' (2010: 26). He says that, 'Judgment entails discerning when to follow one's commitments and when to depart from them, or how to evaluate competing or incommensurable commitments; thus a focus on judgment transcends a divide between freedom and obligation, between conventional morality and charismatic innovation, or between performative felicity and subjective sincerity' (2010: 28).

Despite their slightly different takes (and this extends to where, and whether, they draw the line between ethics and morality just as it does to their attitudes to the concept of freedom), what these theorists have in common is the view that ethical life is not constituted by unthinking rule-following, but that subjects have the capacity to step back from themselves and consider what is the good, or best available, thing to do or say in a particular situation. On this note, we would add that another strength that anthropology brings to the ethical table is its attunement to questions of context, which broaden the focus beyond the individual out to her wider environment and interactions with others.

We agree that ethics is an inescapable part of life and that there is much rich material to be found by anthropologists who turn their attention to ethics in everyday life. We also find the attention that has been drawn to 'freedom' and judgement in the establishment of this movement within anthropology to be helpful. Not only do we appreciate a model of human thought and action which leaves room for conscious reflection, but we believe that this emphasis on the complexity and contingency of ethics and ethical self-fashioning reflects its current interactions with nature, as explored in the papers in this special issue.

Ethnography of Nature and Ethics in the Twenty-First Century

In this special issue, we wish to draw attention to the ways in which ideas of the natural and ethical virtues can both act as grounding concepts for people's decisions, thoughts and actions and to the fact that these concepts often work in conjunction with each other, though not necessarily in predictable ways. We therefore wish to provoke readers to reflect upon the rich, complex and contingent meanings of both nature and ethics, how they interact with each other and how they operate in different contexts. Given the importance of concepts of nature and naturalness in informing boundary-making practices, nature needs to be treated as

an ethnographic subject in a way that recognises its ability to shape-shift and to cross human borders whilst still retaining cultural and ethical weight. The papers in this special issue propose some ways of responding to this challenge.

Nature and ethics are about life and death. The papers by Faircloth, Gugganig and Dow all illuminate how people formulate and make sense of the creation stories of living things, while Reed reminds us that our greatest ethical decisions concern the end of life as well as its beginning. In each case, specific ideas about nature, however slippery and polysemous they may be upon closer examination, come to the rescue of people groping for ethical guidance in the face of interventions into the most fundamental biological processes.

While some are more explicit than others, each one of the papers in this issue deals with how we conceptualise and live with time. The social sciences of the last thirty years have been coloured by exhilaration at the pace at which technologies in the natural sciences have been moving, and the challenges that poses for end-users and their wider communities. Each of these papers show how novelty rubs shoulders with established practice in the ways in which people assimilate and/or reject technological innovations into their everyday lives and ethics. It is hard to know, while in the eye of the storm, whether we really are living in times of unprecedented change, but as social scientists we can at least pay attention to the complex interplay between nostalgic yearnings and hurried acceptance of such developments. Faircloth's article demonstrates the intricacies involved in making claims on nature, human nature and history through the rhetoric of the 'hominid blueprint' for infant feeding, showing just what is at stake in making claims on and with nature. This is further demonstrated by Gugganig's description of the different kinships and natures at stake in the development of genetically engineered taro in Hawai'i.

As work on human-animal relationships has shown, the ways in which people manage the natural, the ethical and the relationship between the two is structured by recognition and identity. Reed demonstrates that working with animals requires a certain 'ontological choreography' (Thompson 2001; see also Thompson 2002) and that detachment from nature and the natural world can enable denaturing or unethical behaviour. His paper shows the shifting moral valence of nature and the different regimes of value at play in how people conceptualise their ethical responsibilities towards the natural world.

Our apprehensions of nature and ethics are about making and sustaining meaning. Further, the rhetorical claims we make with nature are a means through which we can express our ethics and hence identify ourselves as ethical people. Dow makes this point through the example of how people think about surrogacy and

maternal bonding. Like Reed, she illustrates the politics of small differences in her analysis of how people conceptualise maternal bonding while showing that, despite these differences, ideas of the natural continue to act as a robust source of ethical guidance. As she and the other authors in this issue show, even in the Western world, morality and ethics have not become atomised acts of individual choice, nor is it true to say that our values have become so 'literalised' (Strathern 1992) or our morality so secularised or individualised, that we are devoid of grounding concepts. Instead, this special issue works from the premise that nature – while an ever-shifting, kaleidoscopic concept – acts as a tenacious and powerful reference point that can provide the basis for moral judgements and ethical decisions, however slippery they appear on closer inspection.

We make sense of the world around us, and the other living beings within it, by drawing lines; marking boundaries facilitates comprehension. Yet, as the comparative project of anthropology suggests, interpretation often entails the crossing of those boundaries. Hastrup has proposed thinking of anthropology's contemporary engagement with nature as 'edgework', by which she means not so much studying edgy or risky practices, as the term has traditionally been used, but instead practising an anthropology that 'resist[s] institutional calculation and conceptual routinization in the interest of exploring new possibilities of being' (2013: 2). This is an anthropology, she argues, that is generative because it works within the oscillations between certainty and uncertainty about how worlds are made and maintained.

The title of this special issue refers on one level to the geographical scope of the papers within it, which traverse Scotland, England, France and Hawaii, but it also nods to the fact that each paper examines skirmishes along the borders of the natural, demonstrating the different ways in which their transgression can bring us face to face with our ethical and moral values. As Ai Hasegawa's proposal to give birth to a shark demonstrates, we become most aware of borders when we cross them. Snaring animals, long-term breastfeeding, genetic engineering and surrogacy are all practices that cross quotidian borders. They force us to consider our 'fleshy entanglements' (Haraway 2008) with non-human animals, the nature of the things that enter and exit our bodies, the morality of our exploitation of the natural world and ultimately what value, if any, these borders have.

If, in the contemporary Western world, describing something as natural gives it a moral force, demarcating the (un)natural has political consequences. As Reed argues, green politics and animal rights are a powerful riposte to the modernist idea that ultimate power comes from subduing and controlling nature. The ethical decision to live 'closer to nature' can be a way of absolving oneself of the pressure to choose

that is the condition of the postmodern subject, or even a means of resisting hegemonic expectations about human motive and action. But, as Dow and Faircloth both show in their discussions of the naturalisation of motherhood, it can also have the (in these cases, unintended) consequence of reproducing normative expectations of gender, kinship and the division of labour.

Ultimately, these ethnographic examples show how people in different places use nature to make claims, preserve hierarchies and formulate identities and it suggests that nature is a concept in rude health in the twenty-first century, even in the context of a new explicitness about choice in natural and biological connections. The papers here describe worlds in which nature is used to demarcate what is ethically (im)possible and to support truth claims in an apparently uncertain postmodern world. They therefore remind us to pay attention to the continued salience of nature in different people's folk models, even as we may seek to move 'beyond' the nature-culture dichotomy in our analyses of human social life. In her afterword, Alana Jelinek discusses her own encounters with nature and ethics and reflects on the ethical actions of relating to Others of any species. From the perspective of artist-informant she offers some further thoughts about the relations between nature and ethics and points tantalisingly towards the place of politics and religion in these complex connections.

Nature is undoubtedly a polysemous concept with particular local and individual meanings, yet rather than becoming 'flattened', nature seems to retain its ability to act as an ultimate reference point even as it vacillates between multiple meanings. Franklin writes that 'the category of the natural remains central to the production of difference, not only as a shifting classificatory category, but through processes of naturalization, de-naturalization, and re-naturalization' (2003: 68, original emphasis). She argues, therefore, for an analytical approach that considers the 'traffic in nature' (Franklin et al 2000). As she says, a key feature of Euro-American ideas about kinship, biology and nature is their ability to encompass, and thus constantly vacillate between, 'given' and 'made' elements of knowledge. Nature may have come to seem more fluid, but instead of weakening it, this ability to shape-shift has in fact strengthened it (Franklin 2003: 68; see also Franklin 2013). The papers in this special issue demonstrate that it is nature's ability to take on different, overlapping forms that gives it continued power. They show that, while nature seems to many theorists to be at ontological risk from human activities and technology, it can still act as an ultimate reference point and as an ethical guide in a time that has also been described as one of rapid cultural, technological and moral change.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all of the participants at the panel at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in 2011 that laid the foundations for this special issue, including especially the discussants, Sarah Franklin and Michal Nahman, for their invaluable reflections. We are very grateful to Mark Graham at *Ethnos* for guiding us through publication and for the feedback of numerous anonymous reviewers. We are also grateful to Ai Hasegawa for letting us include a photo of her work.

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¹ While Hasegawa states the world population (in 2012) was nine billion, it is in fact 7.2 billion as of early 2014.

² Perhaps we should say here, 'our ideas', since both authors are also part of this British middle class milieu.