

## Eduardo Kohn's guide to forest thinking

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Review of *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, by Eduardo Kohn. Berkley: University of California Press, 2013.

In its essence, Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (2013) is a semiotic guide to thinking with the forest. By exploring the variety of semiotic activity in the Amazonian forests and villages and mediating a culture's coexistence with different semiotic actors, the book reveals what happens to thinking if it is opened up to *thinking with* those with whom one does not share a common language. By peeling off the symbolic cover of language, layers of human communication are exposed which are shared with non-human beings. Although the book is an anthropological monograph, it takes the reader along to thinking with the characters of the book as if it were a piece of fiction. Yet it relies on the disciplines and theoretical underpinnings of anthropology and semiotics to discuss the formation and transformation of human and non-human selves.

The subjects of Kohn's anthropological research are the Runa, who live in Ecuador's Upper Amazon. The lives of the Runa and their making sense of the world is deeply entangled with the animals (e.g., jaguars, peccaries, monkeys, coatis) and plants of the Amazonian forests, as well as with their domestic dogs, the spirits of the forests, and the white-mestizo world beyond their villages. The human subjects smoothly move from the dream world to the world of wakefulness. They model their relations with the spirits according to the social hierarchies of the everyday world and synchronize different times by foretelling future in their dreams and by preserving the colonial encounters of the past in the mythological presence, e.g., by using the formulas that their forefathers used in the 16th century for negotiations with the Spaniards when communicating now with the forest spirits (Kohn 2013: 184). Despite the changes of the body and the mind that a Runa individual undergoes

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during his/her lifetime and even after that, all those different domains of reality that he/she enters have their own rules and boundaries, which the migrator has to follow.

Kohn mainly relies on two authors as his semiotic foundation: Charles Sanders Peirce and Terrence Deacon. On the one hand, both are relevant for Kohn's attempt to move beyond the human in the description of semiotic phenomena. On the other hand, they help to retain distinctions between the semiotic subjects through differences in their semiotic abilities. Kohn rigorously unfolds different sides of Peirce's thought. The topics that get their theoretical support from Peirce include the characterization of mind as something which is capable of taking and laying aside habits (Kohn 2013: 62); the similarity of thinking (as an addressing of one's future self) and intersubjective communication (Kohn 2013: 87); and the formation of the self in the future, which takes place through guessing and confirming or confuting interpretations (Kohn 2013: 206–208). Also Deacon's ideas support several arguments of the book. However, it is his discussion of the mechanisms of learning which ground the transitions between different types of signs (Deacon 1997: 69–92) that serves as the focal point. As for anthropological references, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's works, especially those related to the "multinaturalism"<sup>2</sup> of the Amazonian Indians, are highlighted. Somewhat unexpectedly also Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose name otherwise occurs in the discussions of human-animal relations due to his attribution of a unidirectional relation between humans and other species,<sup>3</sup> has found a place in this company. Kohn (2013: 176–177) addresses a different side of Lévi-Strauss's thought, though – namely the one about "wild thinking" as something which conforms to the self-organisation of thought, once the latter is released from the obligation to yield results. Although "wild thinking" is dormant in our daily functional thinking, we still know from dreams or from certain types of poetic speech how thought can enter a kaleidoscope-like play of forms, when released from its obligation to be *about* something and reach definitive conclusions. Kohn also demonstrates how environmental sounds and images easily merge with such a course of mental events. Besides, transition from one thought to another, which is based on forms, helps to get rid of established causal relations frozen into thought habits. At a certain point such habits of thought might become restrictive and deter the development of adequate interpretations of the surrounding. Kohn shows, for example, how the reproduction of animal or environmental sounds in onomatopoeic expressions might yield

<sup>2</sup> Multinaturalism captures the idea that all living beings as well as spiritual beings possess selves (culture), but as they are different in their bodily constitution (nature), they see different objects behind the shared meanings (see, e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The passage that is most often quoted from Lévi-Strauss in this connection derives from his book *Totemism*: "[...] natural species are chosen not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think'" (Lévi-Strauss 1991: 89).

a sounder frame of meaning for environmental events than a symbolic interpretation which is tied to an already existing interpretative frame. A vivid example from *How Forests Think* concerns two women talking about the sounds of a spotwinged antbird, as one of them imitates the sounds of her movement in the forest together with the cries of the bird, while the other looks for the meaning of the cry, taking it as an omen (Kohn 2013: 174–176). An iconic interpretation that the first woman uses reveals the meanings of the bird itself – the iconically repeated sounds indicate indexically where and in what manner the bird is moving. The other woman overrides those sounds with the symbolic framework as if it were the only semiotic grid that renders the bird's activity meaningful. Far too often, natural events simply serve as an impetus for building human systems of signification, the basement of which might be considerably stronger if the signs and interpretations animals themselves use were accounted for just as much. It is exactly due to the inclusion of the latter that *How Forests Think* can be read as a guide to thinking with the forest.

Besides involving the abovementioned authors, who support the book's central arguments, *How Forests Think* also demonstrates a critical side. It questions sociocultural anthropology's tendency to characterize human beings by their distinguishing attributes – language, culture, society and history – and to build upon these cognitive and theoretical tools that end up covering the whole human essence (Kohn 2013: 6). In Kohn's account, instead of showing the essentially open character of human existence with its multiple origins and possibilities of interactions, such characterizations reduce and cancel out the variety of human, and also non-human, existence. Using one of the central terms of Kohn's book – “iconicity” – we could call the approach towards which the author's criticism is directed “misplaced iconicity”. If humanity is equated with its language, history, society, these terms ultimately achieve an iconic status – they gain their factual status as they are taken as resemblances of reality itself. In such a case, iconic character is attributed to what is in fact symbolic – a relatively recent conventional understanding of what a human being is as an “effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge” (Foucault 1971: 397). This is not to say that Kohn is calling for a strict separation of epistemology and ontology, which would set him within the very circles that he contests. Instead, by investigating how human interactions take place and are formed in the context of the semiotic activity of whole ecosystems, human symbolic thinking finds its origin in other modes of semiotic activity and stops being a mold that gives shape to the rest of reality.

Kohn's arguments are centred around what the author calls an “ecology of selves”. Here, “self” is a relational term, also defined through the possession of a perspective. Thus, it shares the attributes of a “person” as described in several anthropological

studies in the past decades.<sup>4</sup> Despite the apparent similitude of those definitions of “self” or “person”, at closer scrutiny the relation that constitutes the self or the objects that define a perspective varies from culture to culture. The selves that Kohn (2013: 117) describes are defined through their ability to recognize the specific selfhood of other beings: “In this ecology of selves, to remain selves, all selves must recognize the soul-stuff of the other souled selves that inhabit the cosmos”. Once such an ability is lost, the subject becomes soul blind – a term Kohn borrows from Stanley Cavell: while inattentive to the life activity of other beings, the subject can be easily treated as an object, and when turned into an object, it becomes further incapable of recognizing other subjects who are detrimental to the persistence of its own subjectivity. Kohn (2013: 117) illustrates the idea with an example of a hunter whose hunting soul is stolen by a shaman and who thus cannot “differentiate animals from the environments in which they live”. The hunter has fallen into the trap of iconicity which hides the differences between entities.

On the other hand, Kohn also indicates how desubjectivization of the Other can be used as a strategy for easily capturing him/her, as is done while hunting. The treatment of someone as a subject or an object as dependent on the situation at hand (although not in the sense of depriving the other from its soul), echos Rane Willerslev’s (2007) similar conclusions about Yukaghir hunters and their treatment of the game animals. Another central statement that Kohn shares with Willerslev’s observations on the Yukaghirs is that a self, although capable of shifting the perspective, should never really lose its own identity – a person should keep his/her identity as a person, and, for example, not be trapped in the world of dogs.

Given the recent “more-than-human” turn in several humanities disciplines ranging from semiotics to human geography and anthropology, the ground for the ideas presented in *How Forests Think* has already been prepared. Against this background, Kohn’s book gives a strong impetus for further generation of novel thinking about the entanglements of humans and non-humans.

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<sup>4</sup> See, e. g., Hallowell 1960; Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2006.

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