

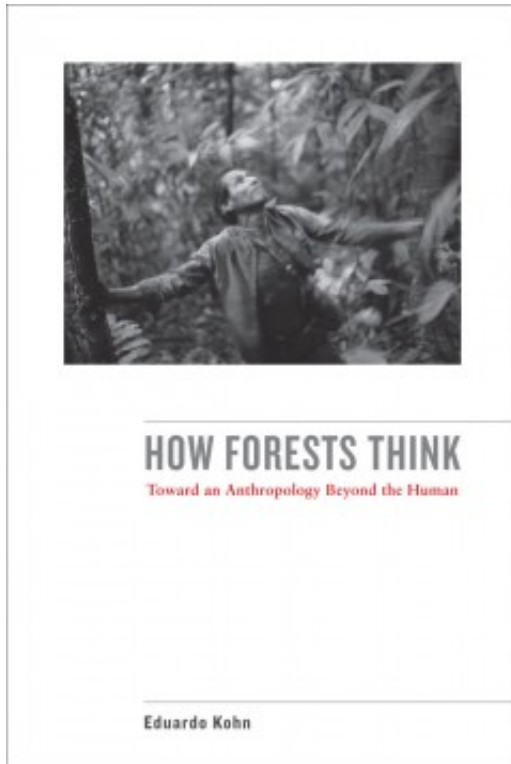
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## Eduardo Kohn's How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human

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By Frédéric Keck

*Editor's note: As part of our new series, [Second Opinion](#) (not to be confused with the SMA's similarly titled newsletter) we ask two contributors to review the same book, respond to the same question, or comment on the same set of issues. For our first pair of *Second Opinion* posts, we invited two reviews of Eduardo Kohn's new book, *How Forests Think*. The second review will appear within the next few weeks.*



[How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human](#)

By [Eduardo Kohn](#)

University of California Press, 2013

\$29.95, £19.95; Paperback, 228 pages.

There is a long genealogy of anthropologists who have borrowed their titles from the translation of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *La mentalité primitive* — [How Natives Think](#). Running from Marshall Sahlins' [How "Natives" Think](#) to Maurice Bloch's [How We Think They Think](#), these transformations run parallel to those of the discipline itself. By entitling his book *How Forests Think*, Eduardo Kohn indicates that he doesn't study the way the people he worked with in Ecuador thought about forests, but the way forests actually think. By making a claim about the relation between life and thought, this book takes part in the ontological turn (Candea 2010) that decenters anthropologists' longstanding focus on cultural representations to ask how representations emerge within forms of life. Following Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo Kohn shows that Amazonian ethnography challenges our conceptions of life and thought in a way that raises the ontological question of what there is. As the ecological crisis leads to a proliferation of new entities that both blur the opposition between nature and culture and ask for political recognition — "pets, weeds, pests, commensals, new pathogens, 'wild' animals, or technoscientific 'mutants,'" (9) this kind of ethnography cautiously scrutinizes the continuities and discontinuities between humans and nonhumans. The book is ethnographic in a classical sense, and yet its chapters follow a theoretical progression, while powerful images plunge into an "enchanted" world — a term Kohn takes up deliberately — entangling humans and nonhumans in puzzling ways.

The main thesis of the book is about semiosis, the life of signs. If we are troubled by the idea that forests think, it is because we conceive thinking as a conventional relation to the world. Following 19<sup>th</sup> century American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce, Kohn argues that all signs are not conventional symbols, and that there are other ways to learn the meaning of signs than to relate them to each other in a cultural context. When a hunter describes the fall of a palm tree under the weight of a monkey as *pu'oh*, the meaning of this sign is felt with evidence, without knowledge of Quichua (the language spoken by Kohn's informants), because it relates hunters, monkeys and trees in a complex ecosystem. Kohn asks for "decolonizing thought" and "provincializing language" by looking at relations between signs that are not symbolic. Hence the program of an "anthropology beyond the human" that places human symbols in the forms of life from which they emerge. Without romanticizing tropical nature, Kohn argues that most of our problems are ill-shaped, or filled with anxiety — as in a wonderful description of the bus trip that led him to Avila — if we don't place them in a larger semiotic field.

Following Terrence Deacon's interpretation of Peirce (2012), Kohn is less interested in the classifications of signs into indices, icons and symbols than in the process through which they emerge one from the other. A sign refers to something absent that exists *in futuro*, just as the crashing of the palm tree under the weight of a monkey refers to a coming danger for the monkey, and a possible catch for the hunter. Habits fix the meaning of signs by producing similarity, and are considered as "interpretants" of signs. Using the example of the walking-stick insect, Kohn argues that what appears to look similar is actually the product of a selection from beings that looked different. Signs thus refer to the past as a memory of beings who have disappeared. Since this relation to the past and future is what, for Peirce, constitutes selves, all living beings, and not only humans, can be considered as selves.

The strangeness of Kohn's text come from the way it interlaces these theoretical analyses of signs with an account of the life of the Runa people, considered not as a cultural context but as "amplifying" certain ontological properties of life itself. "Living beings are loci of selfhood," Kohn writes. "I make this claim empirically. It grows out of my attention to Runa relations with nonhuman beings as these reveal themselves ethnographically. These relations amplify certain properties of the world, and this amplification can infect and affect our thinking about the world," (94). This is an original intervention in the ontological reappraisal of animism. Kohn neither contrasts animism to naturalism as two inverse ontologies in the mode of Descola, nor does he engage in the paradoxes of perspectivism like Viveiros. Instead, he considers living beings as selves in relation to past and future relations, and social life as an amplification of this process of self-formation.

Thus, *puma* designates both predators like jaguars and shamans who can see the way that jaguars see. Runa people need to learn how jaguars see in order not to be eaten by them. The soul, as what exceeds the limits of the body, is "an effect of intersubjective semiotic interpretance," (107). What Kohn calls "soul blindness" is an inattention to the effects of the souls of other living beings. The problem is how to live with *runa puma*: jaguars who act like humans, and kill to revenge other killings, who are dreaded but also considered to be mature selves.

Dreams, analyzed in Chapter 4, are common ways of communication with souls and remediating "soul blindness." Runa people give hallucinatory drugs to dogs so that they will dream, and their barks during dreaming are interpreted literally—in the same way as their daytime barks—while human dreams of hunting are interpreted metaphorically. Rather than doing a symbolic analysis of dreams, Kohn places them in the semiotic life they express, between humans, dogs and jaguars. Dreams are ways of communicating between species without abolishing them, constituting a

“trans-species pidgin.”

In Chapter 5, Kohn makes an important distinction between form and sign. “Whereas semiosis is in and of the living world beyond the human, form emerges from and is part and parcel of the nonliving one as well,” (174). The question he asks is that of the efficacy of form, the constraint it exerts on living beings. Taking the example of the distribution of rubber trees in the Amazonian forest, which depends on the ecology of parasites as well as on the network of rivers, he argues that shamanistic hunting and the colonial extraction of rubber were both constrained by the same form. Forms have a causality that is not moral but that can be called hierarchical: signs emerge from forms, and symbols from signs, in a hierarchy between levels of emergence that cannot be inversed. This is a powerful interpretation of the insertion of colonial extraction in forms that historically precede it: if power brings with it moral categories, this insertion cannot be thought of as an imposition from above, but rather as a fall-out or an incidental movement.

Kohn links this morphodynamic analysis of colonialism to Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of “*la pensée sauvage*” - a form of thought emerging from relations between signs rather than being imposed upon them. Through forms and signs, Runa people have “frozen” history in such a way that they can interpret events through their dreams. The dream of Oswaldo, who saw a policeman with hair on his shirt, is ambivalent: does it mean he will be caught by the white man, or that he will be successful in hunting peccaries? The final chapter of the book analyses the reversals in relation between the Runa and White missionaries or policemen, as well as the pronouns by which Runa people refer to themselves as subjects, such as *amu*. “*Amu* is a particular colonially inflected way of being a self in an ecology of selves filled with a growing array of future-making habits, many of which are not human. In the process, *amu* renders visible how a living future gives life some of its special properties and how this involves a dynamic that implicates (but is not reducible to) the past. In doing so, *amu*, and the spirit realm upon which it draws its power, amplifies something general about life—namely, life’s quality of being in *futuro*,” (208). The question for Runa people is how they can access the realm of the White masters, that is also the heaven of saints: what is generally called the “super-natural.” To live is to survive, Kohn argues, that is to live beyond life, in the many absences that constitute life as a semiotic process.

The strength of this book is to propose a rigorous demonstration while never leaving empirical analysis. Starting on the level of signs in their triadic mode of existence, Kohn finds form on one side and history on the other, and describes their constraints and ambivalent relationships. This is not a dualism between nature and culture that would be solved through

the concept of life – and Kohn tries to avoid an all-encompassing anthropology of life – but a logical tension that is amplified by humans, almost in the way that genetic material is amplified inside and outside the laboratory (Rabinow 1996). Kohn’s anthropology “beyond the human” – but not of the “post-human” – grounds itself in the life of signs where humans emerge to amplify them. The ambition of this ontological claim, its clarity and its theoretical productivity will not doubt be amplified by other ethnographic inquiries on life.

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