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BOOK REVIEW

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VIRGINIA TECH PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

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KEYWORD:
book review

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Byg, Reed. "Kohn, Eduardo (2013). *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Paperback: $29.95." *SPECTRA* 9, no. 1 (2022): pp. 56–61. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v9i1.203

SPECTRA
DOI: 10.21061/spectra.v9i1.203

"How is it that *tsupu* means?"[1] Eduardo Kohn asks readers to consider this question in his work, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human.* This question hints at his central provocation: that "seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs."[2] It's phrasing, rather than the more familiar "*what* does *tsupu* mean," points to Kohn's concern, not with language, not *tsupu* as it is translates from one human language to another, but with representation in a broader sense. Language is a form of representation that is distinctively human. For Kohn, the assumption that language is the sole form of representation in critical thought occludes possibilities for non-linguistic representations from other-than-human lifeforms.[3] Thus, scholars miss something key about representation itself and fail to account for how the linguistic symbols of humans arise from and relate to other processes of representation. Kohn's contention is that "we are colonized by certain ways of thinking about relationality" and thus his project is to, following Viveiros de Castro, decolonize thought.[4]

How *tsupu* comes to signify a body or object plunging into water in the Quichua language is through context that is *outside* of language. Kohn argues this word *tsupu*, like *ta ta* (to signify cutting a tree) and *pu oh* (to signify the tree falling) evokes a feeling, a sensuality, that gives rise to their meaning specifically through the images and events they bring to mind, not through linguistic associations. They are signs that are not fully within language. Nonetheless, these words are signs that point to something specific. For Kohn, this is start of an understanding of "how signs are not just bounded by human contexts but how they also reach beyond them."[5] Representational processes form the basis for all thought. As such, signs and the process of representation are not just the form and subsequent result of how humans think. At least for the Runa of Ávila, signs and representations are to be understood in terms of *how forests think*.

Kohn's intervention proposes an anthropology beyond the human and anthropology is the discipline in which this text is primarily located. Kohn seeks to amplify ways of understanding the world that go beyond the human rather than to simply critique or identify problems with ways of thinking in only human terms. The Runa village of Ávila in Ecuador's Upper Amazon is the site of amplification in *How Forests Think*. Kohn pairs his theoretical analysis with ethnographic research and writing, allowing him to attach his theory to specific a specific site, where he traces ecologies of selves among human and non-human entities. This text speaks to scholarship in science and technology studies, new materialism, and decolonial studies as well. To this end, Kohn traces the entanglements of human and non-human, living and non-living, multiple temporalities, and various processes meaning making. He does this while remaining grounded in the assertion that to move beyond the human and to broaden scholarship on relationality is a project of decolonizing thought.

While Kohn seeks to demonstrate the methodological shift that he argues is necessary- a shift toward an anthropology beyond the human- he does not clearly explicate the necessity of his work beyond stating that we miss something important when we focus solely on humans.[6] Kohn briefly gestures toward the political implications of the framework he develops. He states "what I am trying to do here matters for politics" and suggests "a politics that grows not from opposition to or critique of our current systems but one that grows from attention to another way of being, one here that involves other kinds of living beings."[7] Kohn points to the ways in which his framework necessitates a reconsideration of causality and agency, yet, the reader is left to wonder, or perhaps imagine, the importance of rethinking these foundational concepts.

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1 Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward An Anthropology Beyond The Human*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 28.

2 Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 1.

3 Kohn specifies the fields of anthropology and science and technology studies (STS), but at times he either explicitly or implicitly suggests an intervention into critical thought more generally, as his work complicates categories that are mobilized in many academic disciplines (i.e. categories of human, agency, causality).

4 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 21.

5 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 29.

6 And the work of others who take up the task of "creating an analytical framework" that includes both humans and non-humans. Kohn points to other theories that have been developed within the field of science and technology studies including Latour (1993, 2005), Haraway (2008), Mullin and Cassidy (2007), Choy et al. (2009), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and Bennett (2010).

7 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 14.

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Kohn's anthropology beyond the human attempts to overcome what he identifies as the tendency of other works, largely referencing work in science and technology studies, to either maintain a dualistic distinction between human-nonhuman[8] or to provide a reductionist account that fails to acknowledge the characteristics that are unique to humans.[9] Kohn situates himself between these two positions- a balancing act that is similar to how he sees the Runa maintaining a balance between the human self and other-than-human selves – amidst the numerous embedded relations in Ecuador's Upper Amazon.

Kohn's main project is to complicate dominant understandings of 'self' and, by extension, 'human.' The ways signs are used, interpreted, and responded to in the Upper Amazon by a multitude of life forms illustrates an aliveness to signs – semiosis – where "one thought gives rise to another, which in turn gives rise to another, and so on, into the potential future. It captures the way in which living signs are not just in the here and now but also in the realm of the possible"[10] as they must interpret the future events to come. Signs and their subject interpretants are embedded within energetic materiality in that they eventually (pointing to a future context) *do* things in and have effects on the world. Each sign and interpretant is always already situated within a semiotic context that affects them as much as they (will) affect it. Thus, the 'self' is a product of semiosis. And the self is not always human. Embedded in webs of association, selfhood is distributed, it is a constantly becoming, relational '*we,*' an "ecology of selves" rather than a mentally isolated '*I*'[11] or "unitary self."[12] Further, just as the self is relationally constituted among other selves, the self exists in relation to both past selves and future selves.

What, then, sets oneself apart from another? What about *my*self? How is it that Runa, if they are caught up in an ecology of selves, are able to eat, a process which requires the killing of a self? How can Runa claim mastery over their dogs if they are of the same general self? These questions point to the strain of maintaining a balance between similar yet distinct life, between distinct self and general self. Following a discussion of the required transformation of a self into an object and both the usefulness and dangers of this, Kohn explains the persistence of the 'I' amidst the ecology of selves in terms of the Runa's realm of the masters. It is worth quoting Kohn at length to this point. The realm of the masters "is that vast virtual system that emerges as human – in their distinctly human ways – attempt to engage with the other-than-humans semiosis of the forest. The realm of the masters, then, is like a language. Except it is more 'fleshly' (Haraway 2003) than a language- being, as it is, caught up in vaster swaths of non-human semiosis. It is also at the same time more ethereal. It is a realm that is in the forest but also beyond nature and the human. It is, in a word, 'supernatural.'"[13] This is a realm often brought into reality in dreams. Here, Kohn turns to Viveiros de Castro to explain that this realm of the supernatural is neither nature nor culture, but something above the human realm that renders the human realm and the human subject 'I' to exist in relation to an 'other' without fully subsuming the self to the other.

Kohn explains this balancing as a matter of performativity, in a sense. And this becomes important in his discussion of the colonial history of Ávila and the Runa — the ways in which colonial hierarchy structures the ecology of selves, without which "there is no higher position one can enter form which to frame one's own."[14] The way Runa occupy both perspectives, that of 'you' and that of 'I,' is by taking up or donning the attributes, clothing, the material features that "allow a particular kind of being to inhabit a particular kind of world."[15] Kohn is careful to point out, however, in relation to colonialism, that this is not an attempt to become white, rather, it is in order to "be and to continue as persons."[16] This realm of the masters, supernatural but real for the Runa nonetheless, emerges from the Runa's ways of living in a world beyond the human, amidst and in awareness of interspecies relations, the possibility of a living future, and the weight of the dead. This is, Kohn argues, the realm of relating.

8 See Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

9 See Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

10 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 33.

11 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 16.

12 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 87.

13 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 213.

14 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 214.

15 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 215.

16 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 216.

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Throughout the text, Kohn refers to his experiences in Ávila to demonstrate how uncertainty and unknowability permeate the relations he describes. As such, he describes the various ways in which the Runa engage in communicative practices that move beyond language into the indexical and iconic realms of signifying meaning. He briefly engages with the effects this way of understanding has on morality and valuing, the former distinctively human and the latter intrinsic to life in general. To this point Kohn follows Haraway, stating "[t]he multispecies encounter is… a particularly important domain for cultivating an ethical practice… In these encounters we are confronted by an otherness that is radically (significantly) other – without, I would add, that otherness being incommensurable or 'incognizable.'"[17] Similarly, in Chapter Two, Kohn includes a brief section on semiotic density, where he states "the interrelations among so many different semiotic life-forms in this [speaking about the Upper Amazon] dense ecology of selves result in a relatively more nuanced and exhaustive overall representation of the surrounding environment when compared to the way life represents elsewhere on the planet. That is, the 'thoughts' of a tropical forest come to represent the world in a relatively more detailed way."[18]

Thus, Kohn presents two instances where a multiplicity of multispecies encounters provoke the conditions in which a recognition of the ways humans and nonhumans relate is possible. The non-human world in this analysis has "mean-ings – means-ends relations, strivings, purpose, telos, intentions, functions and significance"[19] that are not dependent on or made meaningful by humans. Again, this is what Kohn means by "thinking." It is that process of growing – a telos- that animates all life. Forests think. This is a critique of Western mechanistic representations which lose sight of the telos of life in itself. Alongside other critical thinkers,[20] Kohn holds that the modern world is disenchanted and void of meaning, in part a feature of rationality.

At its core, this is an ontological project, meaning Kohn is concerned with what it means to be human. Kohn seeks to neither reaffirm 'human' nor throw out 'human.' Rather, he *opens* the category of human, broadening its (in the Western thought) traditionally limited scope, particularly in the study of anthropology. For Kohn, if "seeing, representing, knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs"[21] our understanding of human as the only category of being that engages with these practices must also change. Our understanding of the nature of reality changes. Further, the methods, scope, practice, and stakes of anthropology are destabilized. While these claims hold weight, his argument could benefit from a deeper engagement with the import of these claims. Why does it matter that the nature of reality changes with this opening of the human? Is there an ethics at stake here? Kohn references ethics several times in the text, and his argument seems to point to a similar ethical argument as Karan Barad, whose concept of "ethico-onto-epistemology" highlights the ethical considerations and concerns of knowledge production and scientific understandings of the world.[22] While Kohn does not engage with Barad specifically, he does cite other thinkers, notably Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway, who are concerned with extending scholarly understandings of what it means to be human and the implication of such a move. It seems that Kohn could do more to explicate the ethics he is proposing, which would help to identify his stakes more clearly.

To dwell on Kohn's points on semiotic density, communication, and enchantment, which prioritizes a proximity to nonhuman life, in relation to the arguments posed on form, selfhood, and representation begs the question: to whom does 'thinking like a forest' or an anthropology beyond the human apply? Kohn's analysis is deeply situated in the lives and practices of the Runa people. It is an ethnographic project after all. As such, this project achieves the goal of amplification. Kohn's analysis provides numerous examples of the very practices that seem to bridge both the tendency to reinforce hard human/nonhuman distinction and the tendency to reduce or flatten all life, or even matter, to a unified sameness. As such, Kohn points the reader to the ways in which a different sort of relationality to the world is held and practiced. Yet, to

17 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 134.

18 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 81.

19 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 72.

20 See Horkheimer, Max & Adorno, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments.* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press. 1972).

21 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 1.

22 Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 90.

repeat, this analysis is deeply embedded within Ávila. Can the framework Kohn presents be removed and used in other settings? It seems likely that this sort of anthropology beyond the human, of paying attention to representation based on indices and icons rather than linguistic symbols, could be conducted in other areas where human life, nonhuman life, and general forms are frequently if not constantly interacting and thus relating to one another. That is to say, this framework might translate to other areas of high semiotic density.

Bruno Latour might be useful here in teasing out some of the foreclosures Kohn risks with this framework. Latour calls for an anthropology that can 're-seam' the ruptures modernity has created between the human and the nonhuman. He seeks an anthropology of the modern world[23] as a means of studying how we have never been modern precisely because the world has never mapped neatly into the nature/culture boundaries that define modernity. Latour's approach is one that is different from Kohn's as he focuses on what Kohn might call the disenchanted world. Kohn thus can be said to focus on the enchanted world. What Kohn risks, it seems, is a limit to the applicability of his anthropology beyond the human, which could, in effect, reproduce a hard dualistic distinction between rural/urban spaces. If Kohn seeks to amplify enchantment, the living thought of nonhuman life, what is to be made of areas that are of low semiotic density? Of areas where the form of the nonliving world, as modified by human action, dominate the landscape? Of areas where the 'all-too-human' perhaps is louder than 'life beyond the human'?

This is not to say that Kohn necessarily forecloses the abovementioned spaces from an anthropology beyond the human. In Chapter Five, Kohn points to the existence of many different natures, but only "one culture – an *I* perspective that all selves, human and nonhuman alike, inhabit."[24] This perhaps leaves the space for future considerations of the many different natures and a multiplicity of form by tracing this monistic life, the common *I* perspective of all beings.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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23 Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). 7.

24 Kohn, *How Forests Think,* 156.

DOI: 10.21061/spectra.v9i1.203

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Submitted: 28 August 2022
Accepted: 28 August 2022
Published: 26 September 2022

SPECTRA is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by VT Publishing.

VIRGINIA TECH PUBLISHING