How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human by Eduardo Kohn.

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I became interested in the posthumanities when I learned of the Whanganui River in New Zealand, which in 2012 was granted legal personhood: it was recognized as a living whole with rights and interests that deserve protection under the law (Fairbrother 2012). This realization that a river might be a person, a thinking-self concerned with its own continuity and integrity, led me to wonder what it would take to make visible other persons, other selves, obscured by the dualistic assumption that humans are exceptional and therefore fundamentally separate from the world. In doing so we necessarily come up against a crisis of representation – how are we to represent living nonhuman selves without using ill-defined terms like intention, agency, and representation? Does this mistakenly read human qualities in fundamentally different beings? This is the central concern of Eduardo Kohn’s 2013 book How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human, recipient of the 2014 Bateson Prize from the Society of Cultural Anthropology. Kohn’s primary aim is to contribute to posthuman critiques of the ways in which we have treated humans as exceptional by developing an analytical framework for understanding human relations to nonhuman beings. Kohn’s theory is informed by his ethnographic work with the Quichua-speaking Runa of Ávila, a village in Ecuador’s Upper Amazon. The Runa are intimately involved with the complex ecosystem of the forest, yet their world is also informed by a long and multilayered colonial history.

Kohn asserts that posthuman critical approaches such as Latourian science studies suffer from assumptions concerning the nature of representation. Kohn argues that a central concern of science and technology studies has been creating an analytical framework that can include humans as well as nonhumans (Kohn 2013).

“Given the challenges posed by learning to live with the
proliferating array of other kinds of life-forms that increasingly surround us – be they pets, weeds, pests, commensals, new pathogens, “wild” animals, or technoscientific “mutants” – developing a precise way to analyze how the human is both distinct from and continuous with that which lies beyond it is both crucial and timely” (2013, 9).

As Kohn says, sociocultural anthropology as it is practiced today takes attributes that are distinctively human in order to create the tools to understand humans, and in the process the analytical framework becomes isomorphic with the analytics (2013, 6). How Forests Think is an attempt to break open this closed circle and free ourselves to think with the world – to “decolonize thought”, as Viveiros de Castro puts it (2013, 41). Was Kohn successful? I think so. While some read his attempt as elevating symbolic (and therefore human thought) above other relational logics and therefore reinforcing the nature-culture divide Kohn seeks to dissolve, this oversimplifies his argument. To me one of the most powerful facets of his argument is the attention paid to form and hierarchy. His account of the rubber boom economy and the many nested self-similar levels of form that came together to constitute it demonstrates the sort of analysis his anthropology beyond the human can enable, empowering us to recognize the iconic and indexical living logics otherwise obscured by ethnographic methods that only allow for observations within a human/sociocultural/symbolic context.

The six chapters of the book are arranged thematically. Chapter 1, “The Open Whole”, is about learning to see beyond the symbolic (and therefore distinctively human) mode of representation. Kohn aims to “open” our thinking to the semiotic modalities that we humans share with nonhuman biological life. Chapter 2, “The Living Thought”, considers implications of the claim that life thinks and thoughts are alive. Life distinguishes itself from the inanimate physical realm through processes of sign production. Wherever there are living thoughts there is also a self, which Kohn conceives of as a waypoint in semiosis – both the origin and the product of an interpretive process. Self is the locus “of a living dynamic by which signs come to represent the world around them to a ‘someone’ who emerges as such as a result of this process” (2013:16). Chapters 3 and 4 examine ethnographically how the Runa go about relating to those different beings inhabiting this vast “ecology of selves”. Chapter 3, “Soul Blindness”,
is about the general problem of how death is intrinsic to life. It deals with death of the self. This may happen when an organism dies, but there are other ways for a self to dissolve, become “objectlike” or disembodied. Chapter 4, “Trans-Species Pidgin”, deals with how to safely and successfully communicate with other kinds of beings. Much of the chapter focuses on the semiotic analysis of human attempts to understand and be understood by their dogs. For the Runa, dreaming is a privileged mode of communication that allows contact between radically different kinds of beings via souls. There exists a hierarchy of perspective which is inhabited at the highest level by the spirit masters of the forest, below which the Runa situate themselves, at the same time inhabiting a higher level than their dogs.

In Chapter 5, “Form’s Effortless Efficacy”, Kohn explores the peculiar properties of form – whether it is the “twigginess” of walking stick bugs, whirlpools, or political-economic systems such as the rubber boom economy. Kohn uses the term “form” to refer to the particular manifestations of generals: “Emergent phenomena are generals. Habits or regularities are generals. All of these, in some way or another, are the result of constraints on possibility (see Deacon 2012)” (2013:159). The hunters of Ávila harness form; they do not hunt animals directly. They are rather attuned to the configurations of constraints that shape the spatial and temporal distribution of game meat. One of these constraints is the fruiting resources that attract these animals. Fruit-eating animals amplify this pattern of resource distribution. The rubber boom economy was able to emerge as an amplification of the overlapping patterns of rubber tree and river distributions. Here, Kohn’s anthropology beyond the human seeks an understanding of how these essentially amoral hierarchical patterns nonetheless lend themselves to all-too-human emergent properties such as the highly exploitative nature of the rubber extraction economy. “The Living Future (and the Imponderable Weight of the Dead)” is the sixth and final chapter in which Kohn turns to a particular interpretive dilemma involving the dream of a villager: is he predator or prey? At the heart of this dilemma is the concern for how to continue as a self and what such continuity might mean in the ecology of selves in which the Runa live. Kohn illuminates a special kind of self-reference among the Runa in which the self is also a lineage – a “projective I”. Signs represent a possible future state of affairs. All kinds of signs in some way or other re-present what is not present. What one is as a semiotic self, then, is constitutively related to what one is not. Living futures are
always “indebted” to the dead that surround them.

How Forests Think is a groundbreaking text, demonstrating the conceptual tools it might take to properly apprehend the complex non/human systems that mediate our experience in and as part of the world. Kohn’s work revolutionized my thinking about the scope and perspective of anthropological inquiry. This book is most useful for students interested in a more philosophical anthropology and ethnographic methods that attend to a “deeper level” than the sociocultural that is the traditional domain of anthropological inquiry. Kohn’s method of noticing everyday encounters between the Runa and the other beings that inhabit the forest, and how he unpacks these encounters to reveal other modes of representation beyond the human-symbolic, shows a way forward in attending ethnographically to that which lies beyond the human.

References Cited