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# How Forests Think: Toward An Anthropology Beyond The Human



**HOW FORESTS THINK**

*Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*

Eduardo Kohn

READ BY MALCOLM HILLGARTNER



## Synopsis

Can forests think? Do dogs dream? In this astonishing book, Eduardo Kohn challenges the very foundations of anthropology, calling into question our central assumptions about what it means to be human - and thus distinct from all other life forms. Based on four years of fieldwork among the Runa of Ecuador's Upper , Kohn draws on his rich ethnography to explore how ians interact with the many creatures that inhabit one of the world's most complex ecosystems. Whether or not we recognize it, our anthropological tools hinge on those capacities that make us distinctly human. However, when we turn our ethnographic attention to how we relate to other kinds of beings, these tools (which have the effect of divorcing us from the rest of the world) break down. How Forests Think seizes on this breakdown as an opportunity. Avoiding reductionistic solutions, and without losing sight of how our lives and those of others are caught up in the moral webs we humans spin, this book skillfully fashions new kinds of conceptual tools from the strange and unexpected properties of the living world itself. In this groundbreaking work, Kohn takes anthropology in a new and exciting direction - one that offers a more capacious way to think about the world we share with other kinds of beings.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Anthropology beyond the human is a proposition for an ontological paradigm shift from one that fundamentally separates human and non-human realities to one that views all living beings as existing in continuities. Anthropologists are encouraged to extend their studies beyond human material practices to include interactions with other beings that are not human. The idea is that

human constructions such as language, which constitute the main forms of knowing and representation by humans, derive from, and relate to, a broader form of existence – the nonhuman world. Hence, without abandoning language, humans can endeavor for a more extensive representation of the world through signs that are shared by both human and non-human living things. Eduardo Kohn, in his book *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, argues that symbols are human constructions and, therefore, derive their meaning from the particular cultural context that they are used. Hence, symbols are not synonymous with signs – there are other ways of learning relationships using signs that are not symbols. For instance, one did not have to understand the language of the Runa people in order to understand the meaning of *puhoh* – a falling tree – that is also understood by other non-human creatures such as monkeys. The relationship among humans, monkeys and trees in the forest ecology becomes more apparent. Borrowing from 19th century American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce, Kohn describes these signs as index and icons. Human over reliance on symbols while neglecting other signs that are not captured in language or symbols denies us the opportunity of seeing the world beyond human constructions. This viewpoint gives agency and consciousness to non-human living beings. For this reason, other living beings that we humans coexist with in space could be speaking with us but our failure to relate with them in a common language™ could hinder our harmonious coexistence with them. Kohn demonstrates this point with the Runa people of the forest by tracing how they had to recognize cues from non-human beings in the forest in which they lived to enhance their hunting prowess – their main source of livelihood. Anthropology beyond the human is a path to the annihilation of the nature/society dualism. There has been a long-standing tendency by humans to view nature and society as two separate entities. This dualism has often led to the maltreatment of non-human beings by humans – a view of the non-human aspects of nature as resources for human gratification. Even with the recognition of the interwoven nature of the nature/society relationship, it is often difficult for humans to gain knowledge of, and represent, that which is not human. However, as suggested by Kohn, the search for signs that link human and non-human representations will make the nature/society continuities more noticeable and, consequently, solve this problem of dualism. While the anthropology beyond the human suggests an ontological shift, it does not recommend an accompanying shift in epistemology. It is believed that the ways of conventional anthropology are capable of performing the anthropology beyond the human. However, a research that will require knowledge of representations beyond the human will require more time than conventional anthropological research. In order to deal with this problem, one may have to engage

other researchers who understand the behavior of other non-human beings, which inhabit the research areas with humans. This in my opinion will constitute an epistemological shift; this endeavor will be unlike conventional anthropology & "ethnography. Anthropology beyond human is complex and, although ethnography could constitute key a method, in the whole, it will require a hybrid epistemology.

Can't say enough good things about this book. Complements books by Robin Riddington on the Dunne Va and Richard Preston on the Cree, both hunter cultures from Northern Canada remarkably well. The discussion of the dangers of someone getting "too big" is especially helpful, making sense of much the confusion around the role and purpose of sorcery, mental illness, and windigos that never really has made much sense to me before. The commonalities in these unconnected cultures are amazing.

Not a book to be read quickly. When I allowed time for pondering I found some great concepts. - Using it as a reference for a thesis.

This work reaches beyond the limitations of language and dominant frameworks of thought. Don't expect an easy read, but preserve - for it contains profound insight.

A beautiful and so important book!

Dense, but amazing if you make the effort of really understanding his argument.

Excellent!

Eduardo Kohn's book, *How Forests Think* (2013) is an inquiry on how to think beyond human as subject of anthropological study. Thus, it provides us with academic understanding of our strongly relational ties with non-human beings, which are constitutive in and for our presence in the world. In this study, ethnography is not an object, but a medium to comprehend multiple ontologies; hence, it is much different from traditional anthropological works, which mostly focus on cultural representations. Without giving up being "human," the writer discloses how our "selves" are interwoven with other "beings." In this sense, he offers us to approach the human and non-human as active agents in our thinking of anthropological

study. Kohn conducts his ethnographic fieldwork from 1996 to 2000 in Avila, an Upper Iano village in Ecuador. He uses ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and interviews, in addition to his linguistic analysis and epistemological explorations. Thus, I was expecting an ethnographic examination on culture, gender, or kinship structures in Avila. Also, I was wondering if he would theorize social, economic and political dynamics of the region in relation to the larger historical context. However, Kohn does not do what many of the previous ethnographies have aimed to do. Rather, Kohn criticizes the human-centric approach of the Western anthropology by focusing on other-than-human beings, and he proves us the importance of studying human within a relationship with its surroundings. I will explain how. Although his fundamental theoretical approach is based on semiotics and semiosis, Kohn does not see signs just as human affairs. In his account, signs are constitutive in life both for human and nonhuman beings (43). In drawing our attention to those signs, Kohn delicately interrogates how different beings relate to and communicate with each other. He calls this relationality "ecology of selves," which he finds and formulates within the rainforest of an Iano village, where trans-species semiosis pervades and connects all living selves. A very good example of his idea of relationality is the example he gives about ants and blowing tobacco smoke in Chapter 2. Because rain starts when ants appear, people become able to impede rain by using tobacco, whose smoke prevents ants from coming out. Similarly, when Juanicu whistles like a siren, the flying ants understand as the call of their mothers and they answer by coming to the source of the sign (81). As a result of such communication, a relational world, where both human and animal cohabit, is created. However, Kohn's book is not only about humans and animals. In Chapter 5, he talks about "perceptions" of cross-species. For instance, Runa puma, shape-shifting human jaguar, also has a perception of seeing things around himself. Whether Runa sees you as a human being or a piece of meat totally depends on Runa's perception of you, as well as the way you present yourself before him. Therefore, you may or may not be eaten by the jaguar depending on your visual representation. In a similar vein, the Runa in their everyday life see the game animals that they hunt in the forest as wild animals, but they know that this is not their true manifestation. Hence, they do not eat, for instance, the spirit master's chicken (178). In other words, people, Runa, and all other organisms in the forest use signs primarily to survive in this relational world. Therefore, he draws our attention to the revolutionary potentials and scholarly possibilities of studying another type of anthropology, in which we open up ourselves to various "selves." His study converts Redfieldian notion of "worldviews" into different "worlds" of non-human beings. Kohn introduces us another world "a world where

human and non-human melt into each other through semiosis of all life. Focusing on the potentials of thinking beyond human in anthropology, he provides alternative ways of thinking within scholarly language and unconventional ways of using ethnography. Kohn uses ethnography as a tool to explore the spectrum of forest, which seems larger than "little communities." However, my critic starts right there, as I would like to know more about ethnographic aspects of his work related to the Avila community. What kinds of people are able to relate themselves to the non-human selves of the forest was one of my curiosities while reading this book. How is their society organized in relation to their semiotic relationship with the world? What are their spiritual motivations and cosmologies? How does food function in this society where hunting is a fundamental phenomenon? Is there any relationship between their colonial history and their hesitation to use power upon other beings in their surrounding? I believe, in order to understand humans' relationality with their surroundings, we also need to know such constitutive aspects of their lives. I would like to learn more about Avila community as human is already at the center of this book. Who else is going to talk about this, if not Kohn? Moreover, I left confused about the distinction made in the book between living and nonliving forms. The writer says that patterned distribution of rivers or the recurrent circular shapes of the whirlpools are among the nonliving emergent forms in it, as they are constrained, and thus, they cannot flow freely as much as the water itself (159). However, within a new relationality, which is supposed to be developed in the new environment, they will be living in different ways and within different forms, even though they are constrained. Furthermore, he continues discussing whirlpools as simpler forms than the freer flow of water (166). However, I left wondering what makes the water free. Shall we still consider this flowing water as free, even there is a whirlpool on its way? Or, is the water also constrained affected by the whirlpool? What is the relationship between whirlpool and water? What is the relationship between water, whirlpool, and rubber trees? In order to understand "how forest thinks" as a whole, we need to understand this relationality in a larger context with more ontological explanations. Yes, the language is tough, and it necessitates from the reader to have some background information on semiotics, ontology, and epistemology to the extent of postmodernism and posthuman critics. I do not think that the book is for the general reader, but inevitably an innovative contribution to anthropology with its writing performance. Just as a snowflake having a provisional form between present and absent, Kohn presents us a language whose form can change in any moment. His poetic language is robust yet also fragile "as if the words may rebel at any time and break apart in front of your eyes. He perfectly uses possibilities that are provided by the language, as another sign system. Among the non-textual ways of communication with the reader, the writer's use of photography

perfectly fits with the philosophical profundity of the text. I could not prevent myself from looking at the series of very well selected photographs over and over again. Although his book is not considered as a traditional ethnography for the reasons that I mentioned above, since he opens up the scholarly work into dialogic epistemologies and provides multiplicity of experiences from an unconventional inter-species analysis of subject-object relationships, it must be considered one of the finest examples of critical ethnography.

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