Book Review: How Forests Think

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Kohn, Eduardo. *How forests think: toward an anthropology beyond the human.* xiii, 267 pp., map, illus., bibliogr. London, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2013.£19.95 (paper)

With the nature/culture binary finally breaking down, anthropologists researching how societies relate to their environments have turned to a range of conceptual frames to theorize what makes us human. These approaches include novel studies of biocultural and biosocial processes, modes of existence, and, increasingly, life itself. This dense and utterly original monograph inspired by years of ethnographic research with a relatively secluded native Amazonian community invites us to explore a living world where signs are created and interpreted by the forest as a whole, and not just by its human inhabitants. By systematically reworking the ethnographic and linguistic data he first presented in his 2002 doctoral thesis and in subsequent publications, Eduardo Kohn proposes that the most productive way of overcoming the dualism of mind and world 'is not to do away with representation or project human representations on the rest of the world, but to radically rethink what it is that we take representation to be' (p. 41). Kohn thus embarks on a project as ambitious as those of Bateson and Rappaport, with the aim of renewing the claims that anthropology can make about the reality of the world. Not unlike Ingold, the author alerts us to the ways in which we are blind to the logic of living dynamics, and even 'colonized by certain ways of thinking about relationality' (p. 21). We need a wider and more dynamic understanding of biological processes in order to apprehend the semiotic qualities of life, something the people of Ávila in the Upper Napo region of Ecuador are very sensitive to, for they live their lives in a neotropical forest environment, which amplifies and makes more apparent 'the ways life thinks' (pp. 78, 182). If cybernetics led Bateson to focus on an 'ecology of mind', and if an attention to ritually regulated ecosystems brought Rappaport to differentiate cognized models from operational ones, it is by combining the semiotic theories of Charles Peirce and Terrence Deacon that Kohn seeks to reconcile scientific and folk interpretations of human behaviour. Anthropologists are more familiar with Peirce's work (extensivelydiscussed by Alfred Gell and Webb Keane) than they are with Deacon's. Incomplete nature: how mind emerged from matter (2012), Deacon's latest book, offers a theory of how material-energetic properties and their special causal capacity come to constitute the self-organizing dynamics characteristic of open systems. Peirce's distinction between symbol, icon, and index, once combined with Deacon's theory of teleodynamic organization, can be used to claim that the biological world is made up of living thoughts, a proposition that redraws the line between nature as living ecology and culture as uniquely conventional. Kohn's semiosis is founded on the premise that humans are not the only ones who represent the world; all living beings do. Of course, only humans are capable of language and symbolic representation, but given that 'we live in a world that exceeds the symbolic' (p. 9) and that 'representation is something both more general and more widely distributed than human language' (p.

38), we need to start from the universal properties of communication, rather than from cultural or even ontological differences. The ontological reality we must attend to, in fact, and the one that matters most to the people of Ávila, is that many kinds of 'thinking selves' apart from humans inhabit the world (p. 94). To understand them, therefore, we need to move beyond the question 'How do the natives think about the forest?' and pay attention to the fact that 'forests are good to think because they themselves think' (p. 22).

Throughout the book, Kohn radicalizes material semiotics by showing the openness of language, myths, and other cultural practices to the indexical and iconic properties that differentiate living selves from objects (p. 91). Each of the six chapters offers a detailed ethnographic exploration of how humans and nonhumans relate through the use of pre-symbolic signs. In chapter 1, for instance, an analysis of apparently meaningless words illustrates the onomatopoeic properties of the Kichwa language, leading the author to argue that no human language forms a closed, arbitrary system of symbols. Chapter 3 discusses the predatory nature of trans-species relationality, and the intimate connections existing between representational and living processes. Hunting dogs die because they confuse a predator for a prey; humans get lost in the forest (and lose their humanity) because they forget the obligations they have to their living relatives; men who become successful hunters by killing the souls of animals in their dreams may in turn become prey, once they lose their souls. Chapter 5 focuses on the hydro-ecology of the Amazon river system and the history of the rubber economy to redefine hierarchy boldly in terms of the emergent properties of form, while chapter 6 offers a no less daring discussion of the semiotics of survival beyond cultural continuity.

Whether we wish to urge Kohn to anchor his anthropology beyond the human to cross-cultural comparisons of native values and moral preferences, or whether we decide to take issue with his theory of meaning and representation, there is no denying that he has written an important and audacious book, which deserves praise and to be read widely.

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