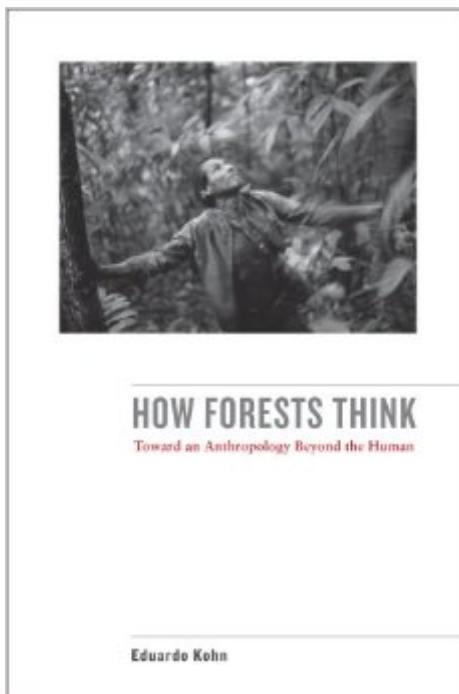


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# How Forests Think: Toward An Anthropology Beyond The Human



## 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 Amazon, Eduardo Kohn draws on his rich ethnography to explore how humans 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

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 Ian 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 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).

If you are looking for a book about the indigenous communities in Ecuador and the ethnographic work done among Quichua speaking people then *The How Forest Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* by Eduardo Kohn is the book you must read to inform you about the worldview of the Runa in Ecuador. This book takes the reader on a journey to explore mind-blowing thoughts about living organisms that intertwine with the study of indigenous communities from a post-human approach or a going "beyond human" thinking. Using ethnographic techniques from the Runa to illustrate their relationship with the forest, Kohn writes an almost literary work to express the importance of relationships and communication between human and the other-than-human beings. His claims go "beyond the human" to develop a universal claim of how the Runa listen to the voice of the other being in order to maintain and sustain balance in their life. The reader can begin to appreciate the book following chapters two and three, where the author bypasses the overly used principles of philosophical and linguistic analysis. Kohn suggests that inter-species communication is based on a close and intimate relationship between species in the same habitat. The use of symbols and signs between humans and other-than-human beings allow them to communicate in a system that is specific to a given environment. The author proves his claims through the use of ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, personal accounts, photos and interviews. I was particularly drawn to the use of participatory observations and personal accounts as methods

of ethnographic work. The photographic display of each chapter stimulates the mind of the reader to create mental images of the ethnographic work of Kohn.

Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* reflects on the entanglements between human and non-human. As a critique to the human-centric ethnographic representation prevalent in anthropology, Kohn foregrounds an ethnography that is "beyond human" that decenters and defamiliarizes the human (125). Kohn posits that as humans we need to look beyond ourselves and learn to see how we are merely one voice within an "ecology of selves" (78). An incredibly rich ethnography, *How Forests Think* transcends an ontological divide and exclusive binary that separates human and non-human sociality toward a dramatically different way of thinking, telling and relating in a world of human and non-human selves. Drawing extensively from Charles Saunders Peirce's theory of semiosis and focusing on the processes from which the "creation and interpretation of signs" (9) emerge, Kohn weaves a sophisticated theoretical analysis within his examination of indigenous language, knowledges and worldviews of the Runa people in the region in Ecuador to illuminate a pathway toward an "anthropology beyond the human." Kohn's ethnography arrives at a critical time when conversations of the Anthropocene (227) and a changing climate forebode a re-imagining of how we as humans think through and find ways of mitigating the continued irreparable destruction of the planet. By challenging us to "listen for the hopes" that such a reality of human and nonhuman selves and to attend to the "living logics of how forests think through 'us,'" Kohn's ethnography offers a radicality that is hinged upon a new sense of care and how we should care toward our world - the material but also spiritual world - that we as humans inhabit along with others.

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