

THE QUESTION BEFORE US:

“With everything from revolutions to hairstyles having been described as resistance, to what extent is the term ‘resistance’ useful for anthropology?”

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DRAFT ONLY

*According to the Runa, if you encounter a jaguar in the forest, you must never look away. Jaguars kill their prey with a bite to the back of the head. For this reason, I was often admonished never to sleep face down in the forest. By returning the gaze of jaguars, the Runa deny felines the possibility of treating them as prey and they, thus, maintain ontological parity with them as predators. This, too, in a very real sense, is a becoming jaguar (Kohn, 2007: 15).*

If I were to bring up say, a jaguar staring into the eyes of a human, it does not immediately conjure up an obvious fitting image for answering the question to what extent is the term “resistance” useful to Anthropology. However if I said my intention was to draw upon elements of an ethnography to enable “bringing in the animal” it might make sense. This essay presents Kohn’s notion of intersubjectivity. I argue that the ethnographic study **How dogs dream: Amazonian natures the politics of trans-species engagement** by Eduardo Kohn (2007) is itself a resistance to multiculturalist emphasis on epistemology (de Castro, 1998, 2004). Although Kohn does not use the term “resistance” specifically in his ethnography, taken as a whole his treatise qualifies as containing fundamental elements of resistance. It *serves* as but one example of the extent to which the *term* “resistance” has been useful for Anthropology.

In terms of theorizing resistance, a definition proves useful. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 7<sup>th</sup> edition defines resistance as: Refusal to obey, dislike of or opposition to a plan, the act of rising force to oppose, the power not be affected by, an organization which resists the authorities. Resistance comes in many forms. Kohn makes the case best in his own words: “Humans are not the only knowers, and knowing (i.e., intention and representation) exists in the world as an other than human.” (Kohn, 2007: 17). The efforts to bring in the animals and have them be at the table of theoretical discourse, of any kind, is a resistance in its own right, anticipating “[t]he kind of anthropology that is possible when we allow the exigencies of a trans-species ethnography to break us out of the loop that traps humans as analytical objects within a framework of analysis that is exclusively human” (Kohn, 2013: 18).

Because Kohn’s concepts are broad-reaching, I choose to cite Kohn’s book **How Forests Think** (2013), an Amazonian ontology of ontology, to assist me with presenting them. Kohn conducted four years of fieldwork in the Upper Amazon in Ecuador, among the Runa, to observe how Amazonians interact ecologically with other life forms. His ethnographic work is rooted in the study of semiotics, which he borrows, from philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Kohn contends that all living forms (not only human) participate in systems of signification.

Semiotics studies look at signs, indication, meaning, likeness, symbolism, communication and metaphor. Ontologically speaking Kohn says “self” is not owned by humans alone. Nonhumans can be seen to think and learn.

Any living form that conveys meaning through signification (i.e. the use of signs) is a *self* and thus an “ecology of selves” *can* emerge that include humans and nonhumans. Humans and animals “partake in a shared constellation of attributes and dispositions – a shared trans-species habitus” (Kohn, 2013: 7).

Kohn’s sign-messages reverberate a strong audible ring signifying them as powerful bellwethers of changing atmosphere within the discipline of Anthropology. It becomes clear that Kohn’s **How Dogs Dream** (2007), whilst focusing on communication with animals, goes far into the metaphysical realm. What distinguishes it from philosophy *per se* is that the ethnography itself provides evidence that tree and animal persona exist. Kohn actually alters central paradigmatic constructs to include an animal research focus.

The majority if not all anthropologists would concur that the use of tools (such as sticks and stones) is a fundamental step in how humans were able to evolve. Wild chimpanzees have been recorded to use tools in a sophisticated manner (Masson and McCarthy, 1996, Goodall, 1986). So if the concept of resistance is to be taken as a ‘discursive’ tool having some sort of utility, the selection of the study to be analysed should not be seen to be “reducing” the definition of resistance to this one example, in this case Kohn’s (2007) “dog-centered ethnography”.

At the same time however, by referring to it and choosing it as an ethnographic study to be featured in a theoretical analysis about resistance suggests that I contend that it does have some relevance to the extent to which (speaking discursively) resistance has been a tool in anthropology (Foucault, 2000).

It could be said that the “concept of resistance” has become practically trite, dull on account of overuse. Within Anthropology, the theoretical hegemonic framework “of resistance” has been critiqued (Seymour, 2006). She says that since the late 1970’s, “resistance” has been transformed into a dominant conceptual framework (ibid, 303). Foucault’s “episteme” and its relationality opens the door for ethnographic methodologies which move beyond positing humans as central to an understanding of the physical universe (Foucault, 2000). His ‘method of seeing’ enables discussions of ‘Post-humanism’, i.e., something that exists beyond human exceptionalism (Foucault, 1971). By the 1980’s and beyond, the discipline of Anthropology included several multi-species ethnographies (e.g. Noske, 1989; de Castro, 1998; Kirsey and Helmreich, 2010a; Song, 2010; Hurn, 2013; Descola, 2013; Toren, 2014).

The theorizer must thus acknowledge her inquiry as human-seen. To see *as* the bird might see things or the idea of ‘having a bird’s view’; ‘sitting on my perch’, is one way of looking at it. Perspectivism, however, is the presupposition that animal species perceive and experience the world uniquely, and in different ways from the ways humans perceive it. There is merit in taking the position or vantage point of the animal (Hurn, 2013).

Anthropological conversation at the intersection of trying to “know-the-animal” and the long-held beliefs about what makes us human is a daunting task. In seeking an entry point into the milieu of the discussion, Perspectivism does fit the frame. But Kohn’s ethnography **How Dogs Dream** (2007), for me, alters the paradigm altogether; a *trans-species* anthropology is a fundamentally pronounced shift. The starting point, is: “Dogs, I learned, dream, and, by observing them as they dream, people can know what their dreams mean” (Kohn, 2007:3).

To briefly summarize, three dogs are killed by a jaguar. It comes as a surprise because the Runa believe that they can interpret the different ‘sounds’ of a dog dreaming to foreshow, to indicate, what is to come. But in the instance of this jaguar’s even bite on each dog’s head (which led to their death) the dogs hadn’t made a sound at all and yet they were killed. A member of the group expresses the view: “It wasn’t meant to be known” (Ibid).

I interpret that what Kohn meant in including this is that humans actually see dogs shudder while sleeping. Intersubjectivity begins here. It tells us that something is happening (inside them, and inside the dog) that is entirely separate from human dreaming. It exists in its own right. “An anthropology that would take this insight seriously would, perhaps, no longer be the anthropology we currently know” (5).

Whilst challenging to get one’s head around, this description helps convey the way Kohn alters the paradigm: “Because dreaming is understood to be a privileged mode of communication through which, via souls, contact among beings inhabiting different ontological realms becomes possible, it is an important site for this negotiation. According to the Runa, dreams are the product of the ambulations of the soul” (12).

In terms of resistance, Kohn is asking us to move outside the dualistic regime of human versus animal. All life forms are constituted by an arrangement that makes it possible to discriminate between them. Humans know of their difference but also know of the linkages with animals from an evolutionary standpoint. Kohn takes it one step farther, saying that animals are selves. They too see us. In the same way as humans can distinguish from an inanimate object such as a chair and a living tree, animals too speak to what is possible, what is occurring, what is *signing* and what is *being* signed. Therefore it is not only that anthropologists may have a need for ontological order, the very order of things speaks itself, of itself.

By observing the Runa interacting with other species and the effect this may have for the practice of anthropology, Kohn calls for “an anthropology of life” and an “ecology of selves” that “recognizes that life is more than biology as currently envisioned” (6). Kohn situates the humanoid world within these living processes and ecological systems.

We-humans are a mere part of the whole. “The challenge for the Runa, then, is to enter this trans-species ecology of selves that constitutes the forest ecosystem. Like any

Amazonians, they do so through what Eduardo Viveiros deCastro (1998, 2004) has called perspectival multinaturalism” (7). Questioning the privileged ontological status of humans as knowers is where the ethnography begins as “an anthropology that is not just confined to the human but is concerned with the effects of our entanglements with other kinds of living selves”: “Rather than turning to ontology as a way of sidestepping the problems with representation,” he says, “I think it is more fruitful to critique our assumptions about representation (and, hence, epistemology) through a semiotic framework that goes beyond the symbolic”(Kohn, 2007: 3).

Humans are not the only meaning-makers. Other life forms, such as dogs are capable of making meaning and being meaning-makers. Kohn is not suggesting that the Runa do not want to *become* a dog per se. It's about trans-species communication, not about becoming literally the animal. The dog is a subject, on its own, epistemologically independent of the human experience. The key point is this: By not subordinating what may be the cosmological principles (upon which animals and nature rely) to human perception/experience, human capacity to relate to animals (both evolutionary and temporal) is enhanced.

Kohn explains, “I examine the relationships, both intimate and fraught, that the Runa have with other life forms. Analytical frameworks that fashion their tools from what is unique to humans (language, culture, society, and history) or, alternatively, what humans are commonly supposed to share with animals are inadequate to this task” (Ibid).

An anthropology that “fails to recognize that *some non humans*[emphasis added] are selves”—is amiss, he argues. Non-humans are not just to be represented (explained in human language and biological terms), but actually must be seen to *represent*. They have subject-hood themselves in their own right, and that subjectivity can come to be known by humans. The animal exudes signs and therefore “Representation exceeds the symbolic, and it, therefore, exceeds human speech” (5). So it is by exploring interactions with animals –not scientifically (or quantitatively to be precise), or by studying them as objects –that provides them with equivalence in terms of what makes them - *selves*.

In referring to the human-animal dichotomy (which by inference also includes the nature-culture dichotomy),Kohn's ‘goal’ is to trace ethnographically the human–animal interactions that go on in a specific village. Trans-species intersubjectivity means becoming other than human. The Runa see subjectivity as enmeshed with other sentient beings. “Intersubjectivity as well as introspection are semiotically mediated” (8).Hence linking with them goes far beyond mere linguistic terms.

It's worth noting that dogs have craftily inserted themselves in human lives: they have made themselves relevant by (by and large) acting as and being perceived as “friend”, leading to the common parlance (for example) that “a dog is a man's best friend.” Kohn is careful to point out that “[d]ogs, however, are not just animals becoming people. They

can also acquire qualities of jaguars—the quintessential predators. Like jaguars, dogs are carnivorous. Their natural propensity (when they have not succumbed to domestic laziness) is to hunt animals in the forest. Even when dogs are fed vegetal food, such as palm hearts, the Runa refer to it as meat in their presence” (10).

The idea working here is that there is shared meta-physicality at play. Also there is a shared metaphysical-experience at once. Kohn says “The Runa can potentially become were-jaguars. Many Runa, especially those that have developed shamanistic powers, acquire a kind of jaguar habitus” (11).

Communicating across ontological boundaries is a way of saying that for that one moment, the person becomes the jaguar so that the jaguar accepts that the person is not prey, but equivalent. “By returning the feline’s gaze, the Runa force jaguars to treat them, in a sense, as interlocutors, that is, as subjects. If, by contrast, the Runa look away, they will be treated as, and may actually become, objects—literally, dead meat, aicha” (15).

Should the person not communicate his strength (his subject-hood) it can be disastrous: “How the jaguar interprets the situation has significant consequences. A Runa who is treated by this predator as a predator becomes predator. Runa who survive such encounters with jaguars are by definition, then, runa puma” (16).

Whether Kohn is taken as promoting the use of metaphor or whether he himself believes a shamanism is taking place is not the debate. In some ways his ethnography reads as an epiphany or religious experience of sorts. The issue he is pushing is that by making these descriptions worthy and part of the discourse it compels Anthropology to expand beyond existing epistemic construction. Human and animal are shown not to be a dichotomy. What is bold about Kohn’s work is that he argues that non-humans such as jaguars also do “work, also engage in the “epistemological” – the difference being that humans are able to put the “epistemological unconscious” dilemma into literal words whilst the jaguar “knows” whether he/she has parity with the human (Rabinow, 2003).

Kohn concludes with “I hope to have given a glimpse of the kind of anthropology that is possible when we allow the exigencies of a trans-species ethnography to break us out of the loop that traps humans as analytical objects within a framework of analysis that is exclusively human” (Kohn, 2007: 17).

This animal-centric view fundamentally challenges the relegation of animal life to an otherness that allows humans to dominate by disavowing selfhood to any species but themselves. The notion of meta-questioning—questioning what you are questioning—comes to mind when studying Kohn’s ethnography (Rabinow, 2003). Going back to the Oxford Dictionary definition of resistance, anthropological studies which look to move beyond a human-centric paradigm does not necessarily mean that in propagating the ideas that the studies themselves are necessarily to be seen having sympathy or being

part of some resistance group. However, it may well be true that usual ethnographic methodologies can actually provide a powerful tool for contemporary activism, especially helpful in moving out of the intellectual maze (which has no door) which anthropology appeared to be imprisoned in during the discursive era after the publication of **Writing Culture** (Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

There is no doubt that in contemplating a trans-species ethnography, meta-questioning becomes relevant. "Introduction: Partial Truths" is relevant to analysis of Kohn in that "it draws attention to anthropology's rhetorics of authority and asks who speaks? Who writes? When and where? With and to whom? Under what institutional and historical constraints?"(Clifford, 1986). For Kohn, could it not be said that the dog speaks, or the jaguar speaks (existentially-speaking) instead of the human for once? Finally In terms of thinking about **Available Light**(Geertz 2000) and the idea that analysis needs to be opened up to multiplicities of meaning, I conclude that a nonhuman perspective has now had enough light on it to allow it to be seen; it is no longer in the shadow or in the margin of anthropological theory. Whether Kohn is mainstream or marginalized in anthropological theory is not at issue here. Bringing in the animal and including the animal at the discursive table as subject—in the Foucauldian sense—in a question that asks about resistance, could be said to *be* one form of resistance. The animals are at the table not as human food but as speaker and teacher.

In taking the social sciences beyond the limits of strictly human relations, Kohn was not being facetious, whimsical, or glib. If the effect of **How Forest Think**(2013) is that trees over time are humanized, this is not necessarily a negative provided it is taken to mean that more human value is placed on them. Trees being said to think is a clever way of assigning subjectivity. If I accept that the tree is a subject and not an object of nature to be cut down for human purpose for wood, then I may be more apt to want to save it from clear-cut. Moreover, to accept it as a subject means that it may also have aesthetic value. Kohn allows for the forests to undergo an alteration of what it means to be that *subject* (akin to Foucault's notion of subjectivity) or in Kohn's case, regards trees as subjectivities. Descola, in his own book **Who owns Nature** (2008), asks a clever question. He compels a re-consideration of how nature is "seen", and in the process of seeing the epistemological basis of anthropology itself is altered. In a 2014 comment on Kohn's project, in HAU Journal, Descola describes the dilemma succinctly:

The problem that Kohn brilliantly addresses in his book is part and parcel of a general predicament that some of us, associated with a so-called posthumanist approach, find ourselves enmeshed in. To put it simply, the project of repopulating the social sciences with nonhuman beings, and thus of shifting away from the internal analysis of social conventions and institutions and toward the interactions of human with (and between) animals, plants, physical processes, artefacts, images, and other forms of beings, [defines] its more recent form. (Descola, 2014: Vol. 4, No 2)

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