

Dogs, I learned, dream.

Latourian influence in Kohn's 2007 ethnography of the Upper Amazon

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Eduardo Kohn takes us on a unique excursion across the Ecuadorian Upper Amazon into Ávila, where the Runa live beside their dogs. He begins by describing the fate that befell Pucaña and two other of his co-species companions belonging to Amériga's family. A jaguar, no less, jabbed his teeth into the backs of the animals' necks, and thus ended their lives. As stated by the village women their deaths were unusual because they came unannounced—the dogs should have dreamt about it for the humans to interpret. How could they know *anything*, they wondered, if they had failed to know this? (p. 3)¹

Kohn became aware 'Amériga's epistemic crisis' (p.17) had an extent far greater than what an outsider could have perceived as a seemingly mundane event. The death of the dogs allowed for him to begin wondering about the implications transspecies relationships have to the practice of anthropology and the 'politics involved in the interactions among different kinds of selves that inhabit different, and often unequal positions' (p.18). The path leading up to Kohn's capacity to inquire about transspecies relations can partially be traced no doubt, back to Bruno Latour's contributions to sociological, philosophical, and anthropological theory. When in turn, the Runa wonder about the content and meaning of their dogs' dreams, they are in fact, attributing animals (other than humans) the capacity of creation and transmission of knowledge—a very latourian thing to do. Kohn, like many other theoreticians, followed suit in the footsteps of their informants translating for us what is probably a very self-evident truth of the everyday for the Runa. He was pulled, in

¹ All references to Kohn's 2007 research paper will be done by writing plainly the page number for clarity and form's sake. All other references will be done in normal Harvard style.

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Latour's words, 'deeper and deeper into the same ecological maelstrom' as his informants (2014 p.261).

It must be granted: great epistemological leaps must be taken for a western academic to see through the smoke of human exceptionalism and arrive at uncharted shores—mind us, shores which are perfectly known by the proverbial 'natives,' but no matter. Latour had, decades before, also arrived into seemingly uncharted shores upon disembarking at the Salk Institute in California, a location as far removed as Kohn's shores in the Ecuadorean Amazon as can be. There, and in his status of castaway, Latour was capable of conceiving a groundbreaking premise to social sciences: all queries, if meant to be taken seriously, should begin with no 'preconceptions of what constitutes knowledge' (1987 p.13), and thus, left the door open for a pack of hounds several degrees closer to the equator to lay down and dream beside their human companions—and for a wandering anthropologist to notice.

Latour has proposed a 'rule of symmetry,' one which would treat 'Society' on a par with 'Nature' (1987 p.144). He speaks of 'fusion' where Kohn will later speak of 'blurring' (Latour: 1987 p.144, Kohn p.12-13), and though Kohn emphasises the extent to which his approach differs from that of Latour, I believe (as well as Latour in his 2014 review of Kohn's *How Forests Think*) that 'the two projects are actually much closer than [Kohn] thinks' (2014 p.263).² Though yes, the differences in Kohn's approach are substantial, especially regarding Latour's classification of the nonhuman, the foundations of his work are undeniably drenched in Latour's call for the construction of symmetrical analyses of the human and the nonhuman properties and realms (Latour 1987 p.144, 1993 p.96).

Kohn takes into account the views of nonhumans but does not extend this classification as Latour does to the inanimate. For Kohn, both humans and nonhumans are actors but in order to be considered into an analysis of social relations, they must be *living* actors. Speed bumps or Berlin keys are thus, excluded. For Kohn, Latour's indiscriminate lumping together of things and beings is the most significant shortcoming of science and technology studies (STS) because it applies a reductionist posture that fails to examine things like representation and agency (Kohn 2013 p.91). Kohn considers nonhumans are capable of representation because they are *selves* involved in semiotic ecological webs of interdependency (p.5). Humans, infused in our human exceptionalism, tend to grant higher degrees of respect to semiotic associations we can easily recognise (those which are particularly human), in other words, associations which possess language-like properties. However, as Kohn notes, most 'semiotic systems that are associated with most life forms

² I will refer to Kohn's 2013 book *How Forests Think* as an extension of the research project and ideas he first put forth in his 2007 ethnography analysed in this essay. The 2007 article itself is weaved into the body of the book along the lives, dreams, and deaths of the Runa dogs.

are not symbolic (a form of signification that is primarily human), but rather iconic or indexical' (2005 p.188)—thus, most of life's capacity of selves' representation '*exceeds human speech*' (2019 p.92).

The inherited and pervasive 'linguocentric representation' applied by social scientists results in replicating the nature/culture dichotomy which Latour, Kohn, and many others, seek to overcome (p.5). Selves are capable of representation without having to 'speak' in the way humans understand speech, which renders them capable of communicating without the aid of human delegates or 'spokespersons' (p.5). Spokespersons are recurrent figures in latourian theory used as solutions for making non humans speak to humans (1993, 2004). This is an important point of similarity and difference between Latour and Kohn's postures, though they both concede nonhumans the status of social actors, the former assumes nonhuman ones to be utterly unable to 'speak' without the help of human interlocutors, while the latter leaves unquestioned nonhuman (and living) beings' capacities of engaging in the semiosis of lived life and, it bears stressing, *the lived life which makes no distinction between humans and everyone else*. It is however relevant to note that possibilities of communication beyond the human are an important part of Latour's theory, which aims at understanding the ways in which things (all things, as well as humans) 'speak,' not by themselves but always 'through something or someone else' (Latour 2004 pp.65-66). It might be that for Kohn *no-one* needs a spokesperson, while for Latour *everyone* needs one.

Kohn here applies Latour's 'flat ontology' with a twist. He uses a latourian frame and sharpens his tools: only *life* then is a sign process (p.6), the living nonhuman, in order to be considered as a social actor must be able to 'capture information about the world' (Kohn 2005 p.188). The Ávila Runa then offer a way to 'rethink human language and its relationship to [...] other forms of representation we share with nonhuman beings' (Kohn 2013 p.15). Yes, as Kohn says, looking for ways to wiggle out of the language-like constraints which define social science theory including 'actornetworks' (Kohn 2013 p.15). Latour tries wiggling out as well by considering humans as no longer the sole masters of speech, which means speaking can no longer be considered an exclusively human property (2004 p.65). When Kohn met Pucaña and the rest of the Runa dogs, unlike most others he had ever met, he entered the reality of the speaking-beings, all of them capable of the transmission of knowledge. The crux of the matter then, became, *What do we do with the dreams of dogs?* Though, thanks to a certain French philosopher, it did not stop (as it might have) in, *What do they matter anyway?*

Involving oneself in this task is what constitutes Kohn's attempt at participating in an 'anthropology beyond the human' (p.3). The Ávila Runa are immersed in what he calls an 'ecology of selves' (p.4). In principle, whatever dogs dream is knowable since dogs are engaged with as *selves* and possess points of view of their own (p.4). Being adequately

capable to perceive others as selves is essential to survival in the Ávila forest since failing to do so would render one ‘autistic’ and unable to respond to the relevant behavioural cues of the surrounding beings (p.9). Or, in Donna Haraway’s more candid words, it would be ‘also intellectually anorexic, indicating extreme epistemological fasting and narrative regurgitation, to assume the opposite’ (2008 p.236).



Everyone in Ávila participates in the realm of the social. But, wasn’t the social an exclusive district for humans? Dogs, as well as all other nonhuman creatures, inhabit the rest of it, otherwise known as Nature. Latour’s notorious 1993 book *We Have Never Been Modern*, delivered one of the strongest epistemological contributions to contemporary social theory by treating modernity as well as everything else— symmetrically. Cultural relativism loses validity, he notes, if we continue to consider Nature as ‘unique, external, and universal’ and modernity as somehow having privileged access to its understanding (Latour 1993 p.96). Anthropologists have courageously taken on the diversity of cultures but only through the reassurance of an objective and indifferent Nature lining the background (Latour 2007 p. 13). Latour tries to break away from this distinction by applying the term natures-cultures with a hyphen, something Kohn finds troublesome when dealing with semiosis of the living world. The hyphen in natures-cultures (as well as in Haraway’s material-semiotic presences (2003, p.5)) although ‘currently a necessary strategy, could lead one to think that there is a semiosis devoid of materiality’ (p.5). This takes on particular importance for the Runa since their intricate participation in the lives of other species requires them to penetrate the semiotic webs that link species, allowing them to see the ‘world from the points of view of other beings’ (Kohn 2005 pp.188-189). That is, ‘[s]emiosis takes place within the world and not at a level detached from it’ (Kohn 2005 p.192 my emphasis).

All sentient beings have bodies and ‘see themselves as persons,’ they possess a human subjectivity (p.7), which is also a way of saying the Ávila Runa inhabit a world of radical symmetry. Viveiros de Castro has a clear notion of what this could mean when he writes the ‘*original common condition to both humans and animals is not animality, but rather humanity*’ (1998 p.56 original emphasis). However, this radical symmetry is not to say hierarchical and unequal relations are absent in the lives of the Ávila Runa, after all, the Moderns’ long history of colonisation in Ecuador and most of the world has proven that ‘equally created humans’ in the eyes of God or evolutionary theory are nothing *but* in the convivial practices of the everyday. Some selves are higher up than others, but at least in Ávila all beings are granted the category of selves.

Selves in the Runa Upper Amazon inhabit ‘different ontological realms’ (p.12) but sport their bodies like clothing, something which is well exemplified in shamanic practices (Viveiros de Castro 1998 p.48). Persons know the world, but persons in the guise of dogs can know it too. Knowing is not an exclusively human embodied phenomenon (p.17). Communication across these realms is possible, though delicate and non-reciprocal (p.13). Learning, for example, to say ‘don’t’ without language (as in when a dog kept biting into Kohn’s cousin’s calf) is a semiotic challenge for which the moderns would be miserably ill-prepared by sticking to what Latour calls practices of ‘purification’ (1993). That is, if dogs remain dogs and part of nature, not person-dogs audacious enough to dream! However ‘translation,’ which causes bouts of panic when done explicitly in modern context, makes possible the creation of what Latour identifies as ‘hybrids’—fearless mixtures of ontological zones between humans and nonhumans, which can be infinitely more useful in a world where more than one point of view must be taken into account (Latour 1993). Humans wondering the meaning of their dogs’ dreams are a phenomenal examples, not only of the outstanding diversity of human ontologies but also of a latourian hybrid.



Latour defines sociology (anthropology’s urban sister) ‘as the *tracing of associations*’ that might, or not, be made of human ties (2005 p.6 original emphasis). He considers social theory should accept to become more abstract and include something other than anthropomorphic figures when it comes to tracing networks (Latour 2005 p. 53). By taking the viewpoint of the other (and by this the other is not,—outrage—only the savages in the tropics) the Runa engage in a ‘transspecies ecology of selves’ (Kohn, p.7) or what Viveiros de Castro calls ‘perspectival multinaturalism’ (1998, 2004). Becoming human necessarily entails becoming *other*. Interacting with other kinds of beings inherently implies ontological blurring (p.13), which is why the Runa are preoccupied with the ways, and more importantly, with the contents of their dogs’ dreams.

In Ávila ‘dreaming is understood to be a privileged mode of communication’ which allows ‘contact among beings inhabiting different ontological realms’ (p.12). So, when people dream, it is understood as a chance of ‘seeing the forest as it really is—as the domestic gardens and fallows of the ontologically dominant animal masters’ (p.17). Hierarchical relations come out to play in the Upper Amazon. Spirits, belonging to an ontologically privileged position vis-à-vis humans *always* see the forest in this way. Through dreams, humans can access the spirit’s *reality*, which must be metaphorically translated if it is to be useful in human *reality*. Dogs, on the other hand, occupy a lower ontological position vis-à-vis humans, so the ‘superior’ *reality* they are able to experience through their

dreams can be analysed literally by their human masters. Human dreams are interpreted metaphorically. Dog dreams are interpreted literally. Actors, in the way that Latour understands it, are everyone since everyone is *doing something* and not just *sitting there* (Latour 2005 p.128). But more than this, everyone's 'doings' have consequences throughout the social network of relations—however unequal these may be.

Kohn's primary concern then becomes the creation of an 'anthropology of life' (p.6), and it shouldn't be surprising. How could we call 'cultural anthropology' or 'social anthropology' something that (a bit forcefully) has had to come face-to-face with the complexities of transspecies interlaced life? How to continue dismissing academic anthropocentrism when the dreams dogs dream matter to people and to the overall order of the world? This means questioning humans' privileged ontological status as knowers (Kohn p.6) and expands this almost atomic epistemology into a much more extensive domain not made-up of individual pieces, but of intricate connections (Latour 2005). We must find a successor to the split between Nature and Culture, Latour proposes (2004 p.8), and taking heed from other ontologies might just point us in the right direction. For lack of a better term (agreed) 'non-Western peoples' have no 'classification of animals or plants that cannot be observed in the social order,' which means their engagement with what we call Nature is fundamentally different—they are '*unconcerned by the division*' (Latour 1993 pp. 44-45). Knowing in Ávila is everyone's business where ' "[m]inds" are not all of the human sort' (Haraway 2008 p.236).



When the Runa dream, they shift from their reality to that of the spirit masters. When dogs dream, they do the same, but towards the ontological domain of the human. The shift goes *beyond the human* and *beyond language* further into the forest—*beyond meaning* (Latour 2014 p. 262). Being attentive to this means being attentive to the world (Latour 2014 p.261), or what Haraway calls 'ethical relating' which entails 'ongoing alertness to otherness-in-relation' (2003 p.50). I take her use of 'companion' which derives from the Latin *cum panis*, 'with bread' (Haraway 2008 p.17). Eating *with* other creatures means being aware of the life and death relationships necessary to each others' nurturing, which is to say, to each other's survival. As hard enough as it is for a Modern like us to imagine it, being food is the potential of all creatures, and although it is a subject Kohn will address until his 2013 book *How Forests Think*, it is undeniably an essential aspect of the Runa's ways of engaging with their companion animals.

Under normal circumstances people eat *something*, not *someone*. In order to be ingested beings must first 'become objects, dead meat' (Kohn 2013 p.119). If animals are selves

which can be hunted and transformed, then humans can too become the 'objects of predation' (Kohn 2013 p.119). The Runa, unlike the Moderns, have not tiptoed around matters of life and death, or the unavoidable fates of biological bodies. They embrace this correlation and push it further. With dogs, as well as with jaguars or any other beings, humans share physical bodies but also language and culture. Bodies and minds exist in commonality. However, recognising the existence of selves with alternative viewpoints is not enough. Social life requires finding ways to cohabit, which applies to humans and nonhumans alike (Latour 2005 p.17). The Runa embrace this interrelationship and take important measures to obtain the advantages inherent in being able to assume different viewpoints. Dogs become 'explicitly engage[d] in the reassembling of the collective' (Latour 2005 p.247), especially when their dreams allow them to participate inside the human ontological domain and thus transfer meaningful knowledge to their companion humans.

Pucaña and the others did not dream about their forthcoming deaths. The reliability of Runa epistemology came into doubt. *How could they know anything if everything had to do with that?* The Runa acted like ANT sociologists; they thoroughly explored the question of who and what were participating in a particular event (Latour 2005 p.72). Kohn wrote down capacious notes. It is an attempt at what Haraway calls being 'polite' or 'living well' which means 'staying inside [a] shared semiotic materiality' of 'ecologies linking natures and cultures without end' (2008 p.72). Although immersed in hierarchical relations someplace between the forest spirit masters and their dogs, the Runa's construction of knowledge aims at semiotic symmetry to ease up communication amongst beings. They at least, as Latour states, respect and accept the multiplicity of humans' complex metaphysics by treating them '*as well as* whales in zoology, genes in biochemistry, baboons in primatology, soils in pedology, tumors in cancerology, or gas in thermodynamics!' (2005 p.255 original emphasis), or in this case we might say, the Runa are polite enough to treat humans *as well as* their dogs.

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