



Living Earth Community

Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing

EDITED BY

SAM MICKEY, MARY EVELYN TUCKER, AND JOHN GRIM



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2020 Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapters' authors.



This work as a whole is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs license (CC BY-NC-ND), which allows readers to download parts or all of a chapter and share it with others as long as they credit the author, but they can't change them in any way or use them commercially. Selected chapters are available under a CC BY 4.0 license (the type of license is indicated in the footer of the first page of each chapter). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Some of the material in this book has been reproduced according to the fair use principle which allows use of copyrighted material for scholarly purposes. Attribution should include the following information:

Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds, *Living Earth Community: Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0186>

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0186#copyright>

Further details about CC BY licenses are available at, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0186#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-78374-803-7

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-804-4

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-78374-805-1

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-78374-806-8

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 978-1-78374-807-5

ISBN XML: 978-1-78374-808-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0186

Cover image: *Feathers and Fins* (2014) by Nancy Earle, all rights reserved.

Cover design: Anna Gatti.

4. Anthropology as Cosmic Diplomacy

Toward an Ecological Ethics for Times of Environmental Fragmentation

Eduardo Kohn

Introduction

I'm an anthropologist. My job is to immerse myself ethnographically, to chart relations, and to find new ways to listen. Garbed in the flesh and skin I've come equipped with, protected by my words and the stories I weave together with them, I take these tools that make me human into the world we call 'the field'.

Perhaps today our vocation's name might feel a bit outdated given that our task to immerse ourselves can take us to fields where not all of the beings we encounter are of the anthropic sort. Working as I do in and around Indigenous communities of the Ecuadorian Amazon threatened by the destruction of ecologies — of relational worlds — these more-than-human beings include plants, animals, and even, and perhaps especially, spirits. Learning to listen to these other kinds of others has forced me to divest myself of some of the human trappings that equip me and to thus travel beyond the schemas through which I normally think.

Despite the fact that its theories are fashioned almost entirely from our human equipment, anthropology, thanks to its immersive method, is a vocation that can uniquely open us to the worlds these other kinds

of beings inhabit. Our attempts to grapple with what we learn there, as well as how we learn it, can allow us to capacitate other kinds of concepts, perhaps even, as Manari Ushigua, my Sapara colleague suggests, other kinds of gods. Giving life to these other kinds of concepts involves understanding thoughts from one world in terms of those from another with a view to grasping the emergent concepts that might unite these thoughts as one. In this sense a synonym for anthropologist is *yachak*, or ‘knower’, which is the Quichua word the humans I work with use for shaman.

Moving among worlds is not merely a scholarly endeavor. It is a political act. We do so in order to recognize the ways we take part in that larger flow of life that is today under grave threat. In this sense, another synonym for anthropologist might be what Bruno Latour calls a ‘diplomat’, more accurately, a *cosmic diplomat*; for the aim of moving among worlds is to find ways to avoid a cosmic — by which I mean an ecological — cataclysm.¹

In recognition of the ways in which culture is now a force of nature, some geologists have proposed the term Anthropocene for the geological epoch in which we live. Living in the so-called ‘time of humans’ requires us to rethink what we mean by the human, and to rethink for the future (this epoch is far from over) a kind of ethics appropriate to a time in which separating humans from nonhumans is no longer practically or metaphysically conceivable. This involves recapturing the shamanic and diplomatic valences of the anthropological vocation — donning other kinds of clothing and equipping ourselves with other kinds of tools, not all of which are of the human sort. Working, as I do, in the Amazonian rainforest, my task as cosmic diplomat is to allow *sylvan selves* — the plants, animals, and especially spirits that also make their homes in the forest — a mode of expression that can be heard within our scholarly, biological, political, and legal idioms.

Thinking Forests

With this end in mind I wrote a book called *How Forests Think*, based on long-term fieldwork in and around Ávila, a Quichua-speaking

1 Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) pp. 28–46.

Runa community in the northwestern part of Ecuador's Amazon region.² When I say that forests think, I don't mean it as a metaphor, nor am I referring to a culturally embedded belief. The claim is rather part of a diplomatic effort to convince you of the reality of things that can sometimes go unnoticed given the limits of certain metaphysical assumptions that form the axiomatic foundations for Western scholarly thought, including anthropological thought.

The underlying assertion in my statement that 'forests think', is that life is mind — that life is thought. What we share with other beings isn't so much our bodies, but our capacity to think. Mind here refers to that process, wherever in the universe it is found, of learning by experience. Evolutionary dynamics, in this sense, are mental dynamics because they imply the ways in which a lineage, over time, and via natural selection, learns something about its environment. Wings, as they evolved, have come to increasingly represent something about the currents of air on which they glide, for those lineages of organisms that have them. This is an example of thought; it is a kind of intelligence. One could say, in philosopher Charles Peirce's terms, that it is a 'scientific intelligence'.³ This kind of thought, like all true — by which I mean living⁴ — thought, does something. Flying becomes a new mode of being for a new kind of avian creature. When thought is alive it is because it makes this kind of worldly difference.

There are places in the world where this kind of mental dynamic is amplified — places where there is more mind, more thought, places that exhibit more scientific intelligence. One such place is Ecuador's 'megadiverse' Amazon region. If lives are minds, these dense tropical ecosystems would be sites for the emergence of ecologies made up of an unprecedented multitude of minds, thinking an equally unprecedented multitude of thoughts.

We humans have developed many techniques to amplify this kind of thinking. The great success of the scientific method is due, in part (I'm

2 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520276109.001.0001>

3 Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–35), p. 2.227.

4 By saying that true thoughts are living thoughts I mean that for thought to be truly thought it must be alive, which, in terms of thought, means that it is constantly being re-interpreted by subsequent thoughts in ways that make a difference.

well aware of the power structures through which science operates), to the fact that it is a form of thinking that can self-consciously tap into the ways in which evolutionary dynamics themselves learn by experience. That is, the scientific method, and the emerging community that thinks through it, harnesses and amplifies the ways in which the world itself thinks. It is its own evolutionary dynamic that has learned to think by listening to the scientific intelligence already operant in the living world.

But this is not the only kind of science. Amazonian shamanistic practices that involve the ingestion of the psychedelic decoction *ayahuasca* or the cultivation and interpretation of dreams, to give two examples, are also sciences in the sense that they constitute specific techniques to accelerate and amplify a process of learning by experience. Their great advantage over other sciences is that their particular form of learning involves the systematic disruption of some of our human schemas for thinking. That these practices have unfolded in that place on our planet with the richest proliferation of nonhuman minds is no coincidence, and it makes them a privileged form of thinking scientifically with the scientific intelligence inherent to life. I find the etymology of the word psychedelic productive to think with. From the Greek *psychē* (soul or mind) and *dēloun* (to make manifest), *ayahuasca* makes manifest to us the mind of those thinking forests that are themselves, mind-manifesting.

So, forests think. But how do they think? The biggest obstacle we face in grasping this kind of thought is that we confuse what thinking is with a specifically human form of thinking that tends to erase other more expansive, but more fragile, forms of thought. What makes human thinking distinctive is a representational dynamic that, following Peirce, can be termed 'symbolic'. Symbols come to mean by virtue of the relationships they have to systems of other symbols, which form the interpretive contexts that gives them meaning. The English word 'dog', for example, refers to the animal in question indirectly thanks to a prior relation to the system of symbols that give it meaning. Thinking in symbols is what makes us so special as humans; it is the basis for language, culture, and consciousness.

But we are also open to other forms of thinking that reach well beyond the human, forms of thought that we share with all other living selves. This kind of thinking has another kind of dynamic whose logic is based more on the image than on the word. It traffics in two non-symbolic

representational modalities, those that are 'iconic' and those that are 'indexical'. Of these, indices are the easiest to grasp. An index is a kind of sign that corresponds to or correlates with something it is not. For example, a monkey's cry of danger is not the potentially dangerous entity it indicates.

Indices, however, are the product of complex interactions among a much more counterintuitive iconic sign process that underlies it. Icons refer to their objects of reference, not by pointing to them — they don't actually in and of themselves refer at all, and they therefore exist at the very margins of semiosis and of thought — but by sharing in and of themselves something of the properties of the object in question. If ontology, in the classical sense in which I use the term, is the exploration of those realities that are independent of how we humans might relate to them, then iconicity, being the kind of sign that is what it is regardless of how it relates to its object, might confer an interesting vantage from which to explore such realities.

Indices and icons make up the form of thinking proper to forests. When, for example, a spot-winged antbird's alarm call *points to* a jaguar's presence, and a hunter simulates that call he heard in a way that *resembles* it, both partake in a form of thinking that is imagistic. And when we cultivate our dreams or take *ayahuasca* we are also thinking with and like forests, for these techniques temporarily break parts of the symbolic systems that house and sustain us as humans, permitting our thoughts to rejoin that kind of thinking that goes beyond the human. This form of thinking, which, as living selves, is something that is also ours, I call sylvan, wild, or savage, as in a *sauvage*. Sylvan thinking (a veritable *pensée sauvage*),⁵ like all good scientific intelligences, amplifies, and thus makes available for further thought, certain properties of the sylvan worlds with which it thinks; it has a psychedelic potential.

To my mind, the phenomenon we are calling the Anthropocene is an actualization of the dualism inherent to symbolic thinking. Symbolic thought creates virtual and relatively closed thought-worlds that relate indirectly to the more concrete worlds to which they also refer. Agriculture, animal husbandry, the rise of cities and states, the industrial revolution, the accelerated flow of capital and information are

5 The reference is to the title of Claude Lévi-Strauss' classic, translated in English as *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

increasing, perhaps historically contingent realizations of this human tendency to create realms of ‘culture.’ These realms are more and more separable — perhaps alienated — from ‘nature’, to such a degree that culture can eventually actually become a ‘force’ of nature.

A great danger of being human is to get too caught up in what makes us distinctively human. Donald Trump’s particular brand of me-first ‘thoughtlessness’, which aligns individual, national, racial, gender, and even species narcissisms with in an ever-expanding arc exhibiting a brutal fractal-like symmetry, is a chilling consequence of this isolation from the worlds that hold us.⁶ In this regard, the human sciences haven’t helped. Conceptual tools that grow out of working with the distinctive symbolic properties of human thought (I’m thinking particularly of social construction in all of its variants) make it even more difficult to understand a way of thinking beyond the sort of dualism that pulls humans out of those worlds that both make us and are *not* us.

Harnessing the Logic of Sylvan Thinking

Given the ways in which our lives and thoughts are so entangled with dualism, how can thinking with forests help us? Sylvan thinking holds dualism in the sense that it is a form of thinking that is larger than the human. This can help us work conceptually with the connections we have to the nonhuman despite the separation that our distinctive forms of thought create. Cultivating sylvan thinking as an ethical orientation for the Anthropocene involves harnessing some of its more-than-human properties. I will briefly discuss four of them. Sylvan thinking involves: (i) images; (ii) absences; (iii) play; and, (iv) something I’ll call ‘generals’.

Sylvan thinking’s imagistic qualities confer on it a host of counterintuitive properties. Consider, adapting an example from Terrence Deacon, the cryptically camouflaged Amazonian katydid *Cycloptera speculata*.⁷ How did such a katydid come to look so much like a leaf? This does not depend on anyone noticing this resemblance — our usual understanding of how likeness works. Rather, its likeness is the product

6 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373780>. I adopt the term ‘thoughtlessness’ from Donna Haraway (p. 36), following Hannah Arendt.

7 Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997).

of the fact that the ancestors of its potential predators did *not* notice its ancestors. These potential predators failed to notice the differences between these ancestors and actual leaves. Over evolutionary time those lineages of katydids that were least noticed survived. Thanks to all the proto-cryptic katydids that were noticed — and eaten — because they differed from their environments, *Cycloptera speculata* came to be more like the world of leaves around it.

How this katydid came to be so invisible reveals important properties of iconicity. Iconicity, the most basic kind of sign process, is highly counterintuitive because it involves a dynamic in which two things are not distinguished. We tend to think of icons as signs that point to the similarities among things we know to be different. But semiosis does not begin with the recognition of any intrinsic similarity or difference. Rather, it begins with *not* noticing possible differences. It begins with indistinction or confusion.

Let me say something else about the imagistic logic that characterizes sylvan thinking: it is deeply personal. Icons share something in common with the objects they represent. In a way they *are* their objects. There is an emotional correlate to this — a feeling of identification, a feeling of knowing — a feeling of oneness. However, convincing others of this can be quite difficult. To ‘get’ an icon you have to feel it for yourself. In my lectures I often illustrate iconic thinking by having people guess at the meaning of a Quichua imagistic ‘word’, such as *tsupu*, which is used to describe an object making contact with and then submerging under water. I then contrast this word with other more standard conventional words in Quichua (which, being conventional, don’t have this kind of sonic imagistic connection to what they mean). Once I tell them *tsupu*’s meaning, many people in an audience will immediately come to feel what it means. It is a likeness of an object plunging that they feel inside them. Invariably, however, some will not feel it, and no argument I can make will make them feel it. Sylvan thinking shares these qualities. The only way to grasp this imagistic logic is to feel it for yourself. Doing so requires a being/ becoming sylvan, insofar as you need to find within you some of its qualities that you already share to iconically identify with its mode of being. This has important methodological implications for how we should go about thinking with forests, to which I will return.

Thinking with cryptic insects leads to my second observation about sylvan thinking: that it has an absential quality. We usually think of nature in terms of presence: matter, materiality, and existence are the foundations for our metaphysics. But absence is central to life; it is a kind of non-existence that is real.⁸ Think of the ways in which such katydids are multiply absential. They have become ‘invisible’ (that is, absent) because they *re-present* (an absent) leafy environment. The environment is absent, in the sense that, after all, these katydids are not their environment. They are not, in fact, leaves. Katydids do this for (an absent) *future* generation — the future katydids in a lineage of katydids. They can do so thanks to the (absent) *dead* who were noticed and eaten by predators.

My third observation about sylvan thought is that it involves play. By play, I mean a dynamic in which previously tightly coupled means/ends relations are loosened such that something new can emerge. Play is ubiquitous in the living world. But this is because means/ends relations are intrinsic to the living world, and not just something we humans impose on it. In this technical Weberian sense, the forest is enchanted. By saying that life is semiotic, that forests think, I am also saying that function, representation, purpose, and telos — in short, ends — are part and parcel of the living world.

But if we think of means and ends as tightly coupled — transitive and deductive — there is no room for something new, for growth, for flourishing, which of course is also central to life. This is where play comes in. The biological production of variation is a form of play; Gregory Bateson’s nip, that bite that denotes the bite but not that which the bite denotes (a ludic suspension of aggression he saw in dogs and other social mammals), is also a form of play; and any relaxation on selection creates a space for play.⁹ Growth requires play in this sense. And we should remember that, for Claude Lévi-Strauss, the *pensée sauvage* is also a form of play in that it is a kind of thought that asks for no return.

The final observation about sylvan thinking is that it involves generality. Thanks to all the katydids that were not noticed there is now more ‘leafiness’ in this world. Not only are leaves that leafy but so too

8 Terrence Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011).

9 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000) p. 180.

are some insects. Generality is a real property of the world — one that grows in the realm of life. Life proliferates generals. Through a process of constrained confusion living dynamics create *kinds*. Think of Jacob von Uexküll's tick, the one that is 'world poor' because it doesn't do a lot of differentiation.¹⁰ By not discriminating between humans and deer, indiscriminately parasitizing both, confusing them, it creates a *kind* — the kind of being through which, for example, Lyme disease might pass. The world, then, is not just a continuum waiting to be categorized by human minds and cultures.

This logic extends to biological concepts such as the distinction between individual and lineage. It may be that only the individual exists, but the lineage is the reality that makes that existence possible. Any individual katydid is only what it is by virtue of a lineage that temporally exceeds it. This is true also of the species. It too has this kind of general reality. In this regard, the species is not unlike the Amerindian concept of the masters of animals. A master of animals is a being that is the protector and general instantiation of the species in question. All hunting passes through this generality. Hunters dream with or about this domain of the general in order to connect with the individual that will become meat. This generality is real even if its existence is only instantiated in the forest encounter.

The reality of forest spirits, then, is on par with the reality of a species or lineage. Out of an ecology of selves there emerges an ecology of spirits — or gods — as well. And this reality is not reducible to 'the social'. It is to this emergent spirit-life that we must also learn to attend. For these gods, or others like them, will be the ones who can *orient* us in the way that a kind orients an individual, and a dream orients the hunter. An ethical orientation for the Anthropocene must thus necessarily also involve a spiritual re-orientation. Spirits, gods, and souls are part and parcel of the sylvan thinking we need to inhabit once again.

The Politics of Sylvan Thinking

Having thought a great deal about sylvan thinking, and convinced that thinking with it can provide ways to think for our times, my current

10 Jakob von Uexküll, 'The Theory of Meaning', *Semiotica*, 42.1 (1982), 25–82, <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.1982.42.1.25>

research projects focus on finding spaces of collaboration with others who seek to sustain and capacitate domains of sylvan thinking by tapping into their imagistic, absential, playful, and general logics.

This has brought me into close collaboration with a far-flung community of thinkers whose human members range from Indigenous leaders and shamans, to environmental activists, conceptual artists, and human rights lawyers. On the nonhuman side, it has led me to explore ways to think with the spirits of the forest, the obdurate animacy of *huaira* — wind — *alpa* — earth — as they make themselves present to me. This, in turn, has raised many questions: what methods should one develop to listen to these other beings? And, given that our modern metaphysical framework has relegated spirits to the realm of belief, how can one bring them back into concept-work and conversation without being branded a ‘believer’?

I should say at the outset that Ecuador is a privileged place to cultivate an ethics of sylvan thinking for the Anthropocene. First off, as I’ve mentioned, this is because it houses an unprecedented amount of biodiversity, and diverse communities of people who continue to think with it, especially but not only, in its Amazonian forests, not all of which are, at least for the moment, in ruins. This kind of life and human forms of living with it are given unprecedented recognition in Ecuador’s 2008 constitution, which was the first in the world to recognize the Rights of Nature. This constitution is also framed in terms of *Sumak Kawsay*, an idea of living well that is not based on the modern metrics of progress and unfettered economic growth, as well as a respect for Indigenous plurinationalism and self-determination.

As lofty as this document appears, its aspirations are rarely given a practical existence. Although written at the beginning of Rafael Correa’s presidency, the Correa regime was characterized by an increasing suppression of alternative voices — sylvan and otherwise — and a ratcheting up of extractive policies and practices. Large-scale mining projects, roads, hydroelectric dams, and oil concessions have proliferated and many of these are funded by China, to whom Ecuador now has massive debts. Ecuador’s ‘neo-extractivist’ tendency, as this logic is known in Latin America, runs counter to these innovative constitutional principles, as it has sought to feed a state whose top-down logic became increasingly amplified under the increasingly authoritarian Correa

regime. If a vibrant democracy should resemble a dense forest, Ecuador is increasingly becoming a monocrop plantation. This is the terrain through which sylvan thought must learn to navigate.

As its own ethical practice, sylvan thinking would take the logic of the image as a legitimate form of knowing. It would cultivate absential dynamics as a kind of causal modality that is different from the exclusively ‘push-and-pull’ understanding of agency typical to our metaphysics. Its object would be to hold open the spaces of play from which it continuously emerges. And it would operate under the guidance of its own general emergent psychedelic properties, which, in other words, we might call *spirit*.

Bibliography

- Bateson, Gregory, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
- Deacon Terrence, *The Symbolic Species* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997).
- *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011).
- Haraway, Donna, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373780>
- Kohn, Eduardo, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520276109.001.0001>
- Latour, Bruno, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
- Peirce, Charles S., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–35).
- von Uexküll, Jakob, ‘The Theory of Meaning’, *Semiotica*, 42.1 (1982), 25–82, <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.1982.42.1.25>

