Runa

Human but *not only*

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> *It is impossible to take from them this superstition because the destruction of these* guacas *would require more force than that of all the people of Peru in order* **to move these stones and hills**.
> —Cristóbal de Albornoz, 1584[1]

How forests think is a great book that pushes thought carefully. The interface that motivates it—multispecies, semiosis, history, ethnography—is capaciously inviting. Personally, both the location of this book in the great Amazon (a close thinking home to me) and Eduardo's hope for alter-politics feel like the right place to take ethnographic-conceptual risks. I hope my comments below do so.

The above quote by Cristóbal de Albornoz belongs to the process I am calling the anthropo-not-seen. A condition of possibility of the anthropocene, I conceptualize it as the world-making process by which heterogeneous worlds that did not make themselves through the division between humans and nonhumans—*nor necessarily conceived as such the different entities in their assemblages*—were *both* obliged into that distinction *and* exceeded it. The anthropo-not-seen was thus the process of destruction of these worlds *and* the impossibility of such destruction. Initial obvious actors in it were people like Cristóbal de Albornoz—a friar well known after his

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1. Quoted in Dean 2010: 27.

activities to "extirpate idolatries," one of the practices from which the New World emerged as inhabited by redeemable humans and nature—all God creations.

In an earlier work (see de la Cadena 2010) I called earth-beings the kind of entities (also known as *guacas*) for which de Albornoz demanded destruction. "Earth-beings" is my translation from the word with which I met them: *tirakuna*. The word is composed of the Spanish *tierra* and its Quechua pluralization *kuna*. So *tierras* or "earths" would be a literal translation. Intriguingly, de Albornoz translated guacas as "stones" and "hills" and identified this fact as the cause of the difficulty to eradicate what he considered a relationship of false beliefs: removing them appeared impossible, for guacas were "earths!" Five hundred years later "earths" present the same plight to new eradicators: mining corporations, agents of the so-called anthropocene, who translate them as mountains, and a source of minerals, and therefore wealth. Unlike their colonial counterparts, they have the power to remove mountains, redirect rivers, or replace lakes with efficient reservoirs for water.

This ethnographic comment offers a site to present both my coincidence and my divergence with how Eduardo Kohn organizes one main thrust of his book: namely, presenting an alternative to the analyses that divide humans and nonhumans, even those that purport to undo such division. Kohn's critique of Bruno Latour's ANT version is where my coincidence with him is most obvious: Latour treats nonhumans as generic things endowed with human-like characteristics; thus he "overlooks that *some nonhumans, namely, those that are alive, are selves*" (2013: 92, emphasis added). Instead, Kohn's "concern is with exploring interactions, not with nonhumans generically—that is, treating objects, artifacts, and lives as equivalent entities—but *with nonhuman living beings in terms of those distinctive characteristics that make them selves*" (2013: 92, emphasis added).

In the work mentioned above I took distance from Latour—even if I also drew inspiration from his work—in lines similar to Kohn's above. The ethnographic circumstances of my comments were a series of confrontations against open-pit mining endeavors that would destroy mountains/earth-beings. I explained that the tirakuna made public in politics were/are not "simply nonhumans," they were beings whose existence and that of the worlds to which they belong was threatened by the neoliberal wedding of capital and the state. I therefore called them "other-than-humans" and explained that when mountains break into political stages, they do so *also* as earth-beings, "contentious objects whose mode of presentation is not homogenous with the ordinary mode of existence of the objects thereby identified" (Rancière 1999: 99 in de la Cadena 2010: 342). I stay faithful to what I said four years ago. However, today I would also extend being contentious to the *runakuna* that made possible the public presence of tirakuna. They, runakuna, are also not homogenous with the ordinary mode of existence attributed to humans—they are contentious to it. Why this is the case will be clear momentarily—as it will lead to my divergence with Kohn, which (as perhaps is already apparent) emerges from the distinct ethnographic moments that make us think.

My friends in the Andean village where I worked use the word *runa* (the plural is *runakuna*) when talking about themselves and about people like them—usually (although not always) monolingual Quechua speakers. Like in Ávila, this is not an ethnonym (that would be the pejorative Indian, or the more official and less frequent "indigenous Quechua" and in either case what *we*—a heterogeneous one—would

call *them*.) Runa are, they say, "those like us, not those like you"—or "*ñuqayku hina, manan qan hinachu*"–with ñuqayku being the plural pronoun for a first person that excludes the interlocutor (me, in the case of our conversation). The closest Spanish equivalent to runa is *gente*—close to "people" in English, but I'd rather stay with the Spanish word (people is too close to *pueblo*, which has populist political connotations useless for my purposes here).[2] These translations are important; however, as important is that "runakuna" *and* "tirakuna" come into being through the relations that enable them and they, in turn, are able to establish.[3] I should unfold this.

The nonhumans, or to be accurate other-than-humans, that make me think, the tirakuna are *beings*—but they are not living entities in the biological sense of the word. Contradicting de Albornoz, guacas were not only stones or hills; opposing mining corporations, earth-beings are not only geology housing mineral wealth. They are not spirits either. In contemporary Cuzco, tirakuna are beings that along with runakuna form *ayllu*, the relation from where, inherently related, they make the place that they also are. In ayllu, earth-beings *are with* runa; removing the first (either through extirpation of idolatries or open-pit mining) would change the latter in a way that neither Christian baptism nor the salaries of development can provide an equivalent. Unlike biology and geology, runakuna and tirakuna cannot be disentangled from each other—unless both become something else (perhaps *only* humans and stones). Mountains (or stones) preexist the relationship with humans; the opposite also happens. Differently, neither tirakuna nor runakuna preexist each other, they *are simultaneously* in/as ayllu.

In Kohn's conceptualization, tirakuna would be stones, which can *be* other than such if animated by humans; they can also be form, physically couching/organizing the intraaction of human and nonhuman living thought. So this is my ethnographic objection: powerful as the framing of "life as semiosis" is to go beyond the human (as in Kohn's proposal), it belongs to the genealogy of the world that produced the human ontologically separated from the nonhuman, as well as life as biology separated from geology—or stones. The human that Eduardo goes beyond is the human that emerged from this same genealogy, and it did so as exceptional—and runa subjects are not this human *only*. My venture is that in the world where tirakuna *are with* runakuna,[4] geos and bios do not exhaust what they are. Were I to make smooth equivalences between runa and human on the one hand

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2.   For this translation, I thank César Itier, French linguist and Quechua specialist. A quick etymological online search of the word *gente* yields: "from Late Latin gentilis "foreign, heathen, pagan," from Latin gentilis "person belonging to the same family, fellow countryman," from gentilis (adj.) "of the same family or clan," from gens (genitive gentis) "race, clan." In: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=human, accessed June 24, 2014. That the terms local groups use to name themselves mean "people" has been rehearsed for a long time. I quote Viveiros de Castro: "terms such as wari (Vilaca 1992), dene (McDonnell 1984) or masa (Arhem 1993) mean 'people'" (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Eduardo Kohn translates runa as person (2, 93, and others) and as *human* persons in the index (265).

3.   In this I follow rather obviously Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage according to which existing (or being) is the coming together of heterogeneous components.

4.   This is the Quechua plural for *runa*.

and tirakuna and nonhumans on the other one, I would be ignoring ontological excesses between each pair. The assemblage that makes runakuna *with* tirakuna enables them in a way that the assemblage that makes the humans divided from nonhumans does not.

The last part of my reasoning above may bear resemblance to Kohn's reasoning: "who Oswaldo is cannot be disentangled from how he relates to these many kinds of beings" (2013: 192). It would be plausible to add that the "jaguars" and "humans" who on looking back at each other become persons to each other, are not our usual nonhumans and humans. I want to slow down these two notions, and propose that runakuna and tirakuna are human and nonhuman respectively—*but not only.* Runakuna assemblage exceeds humanity; in symmetrical fashion the assemblage of tirakuna exceeds the nonhuman. Using Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's idea that Amerindians' words for self-designation do not denote human species but rather the position of the subject, I offer that when *runa* defines the position of the sub-ject, this subject is *not only human.* Similarly, when tirakuna occupy the position of the subject, they are *not only nonhuman.* That they take place (literally) simultane-ously in-ayllu makes impossible their being one *without* the other, a condition that confirms excess as human and nonhumans.

Our habitual assumption is that underpinning the coloniality of the European expansion was the denial humanity to its other. *What if this were not the case?* For example, contrary to popular academic consumption, the discussion in the famous Valladolid conference was not predominantly about whether the people in the New World were humans or not. Rather it was mostly about the kind of humans they were and, accordingly, the kind of treatment that would best suit their conversion to Christianity. Sepúlveda believed Indians were "natural slaves" and coherently proposed war (followed by slavery) as the method to redeem them. De Las Casas thought inhabitants of the New World were cordial and such should be their method of incorporation to Christianity. Neither doubted their being humans—not even their having souls. Colonial missionaries in Cuzco translated runa into the Spanish *prójimo*[5]—fellow man or fellow human being.[6] They pro-ceeded on the assumption of a relationship of similarity from where difference then appeared as a hierarchical relation with the self: a God-made human self guided by faith.[7]

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5. I thank Cesar Itier for this note.

6. A search about the etymology of "human" yields:
   Human: (12c.), from Latin humanus "of man, human," also "humane, philanthropic, kind, gentle, polite; learned, refined, civilized," probably related to homo (genitive hominis) "man" (see homunculus) and to humus "earth," on notion of "earthly beings," as opposed to the gods (compare Hebrew adam "man," from adamah "ground").

7. An anecdote—first cited by Lévi Strauss (1999) (and also commented by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and then Latour)—seems to suggest that extending sameness to then proceed to identify difference was not what some people of the Antilles practiced when they ran into the Conquistadors. On the contrary sameness had to be proven by submerging in water the bodies of the newcomers and testing for putrefaction—they did putrefy, a proof that they shared some sameness.

The Christianization of the New World—the enactment of assemblages of re-deemable humans and of nature as God's presence—may have very well been the colonial condition of possibility of Latour's Modern Constitution. Perhaps, then, it was not a coincidence that it was inspired by ethnographic-conceptual work on Amerindian worlds that both faced Christianization and state-led develop-ment and exceeded such processes. Latour drew from both Philippe Descola's discussion about Achuar's indifference between nature and society and from Viveiros de Castro's accounts of the Araweté world as peopled by beings with the similar souls and different bodies. Both scholarly accounts contradict the uni-versality of nature as reality out there: "First . . . ask whether or not nature itself exists" is a phrase in a not so recent conversation between Kohn and Descola (Kohn 2009: 142).

How forests think belongs to the above genealogy. Also building on it, I propose that a) what makes worlds different from the world the Modern Constitution inau-gurated is *not only* their disregard of the divide between humans and nonhumans but *also* the consideration of those entities as such, and b) that, therefore, calling humans and nonhumans the beings that, for example, engage in perspectival ex-changes, or that take place together in ayllu relations, needs to be revisited. Asking whether or not nature itself exists may beg the question about whether or not the human itself exists. Analytical symmetry—and "going beyond the human"—re-quires it. When worlds meet "multispecies ethnography" may open up to partial connections with entities that become not *only* species—human or nonhuman. Facing the challenge ethnographically, I propose that when runakuna and tirakuna emerge from the relational in-ayllu world they activate *each other as persons*—there is not a nonperson in this emergence. And to clarify at the risk of repetition, by saying that both runakuna and tirakuna are humans and mountains *but not only* it is the intrarelated emergence as persons *that does not imply its binary* (*nonperson*) that I reclaim. Drawing from Eduardo Kohn's work, when the persons that popu-late Ávila are able to, for example, be jaguars and human, I propose they are neither human nor jaguar as "we know them." Their being like this exceeds Christian and biological life.

This idea is emergent in Viveiros de Castro's work. The assemblage that en-ables persons with different bodies to exchange perspectives among them does not only correspond to assemblages of humans and nonhumans. In his earlier work he uses the labels human and nonhuman to qualify such persons; however, he also remarks that Amerindian words for self-designation "usually translated as 'human being' . . . do not denote humanity as a natural species. They refer rather to the social condition of personhood" (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 476). And in a more recent work with Déborah Danowski they comment that "the question of . . . what is understood as 'human' or as 'people' by other thought collectives consensually regarded (by 'us') as humans, is seldom posed" (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski 2013). Similarly, in her work on Melanesia, Marilyn Strathern identifies the so-cial entities that emerge from relations as "persons." In one of her latest works she writes, "in the Melanesian situation where the term *human* is redundant, perspec-tivist reciprocity may be between 'social persons' (parties to a relation). Persons offer

perspectives on one another because of the relationship between them" (Strathern 2011: 63, italics in the original).[8]

To talk about runakuna as *not only* humans is not comforting. Questioning the universality of nature (and provincializing nonhumans) to proceed with multinaturalism for example, is easier than proposing a similar conceptual move for humanity that avoids culture. The suspicion of coloniality underpinning this thought haunts such proposal. But what if the inert habit through which "human" stands for runa reflects the continuation of a colonial practice? What if this apparent egalitarianism (which is comforting) also inscribed the vocation of an ontological politics that while granting itself the power to grant universal rights to humans *also* denies forms of being person that do not emerge from either (allegedly) Greek or Judeo-Christian genealogies? This may be where Eduardo Kohn and I converge. Commenting on a painting seemingly representing the evolution of "savage" to "civilized" (figure 9) he describes the "man in the crisp white shirt" (2013: 200) as undoubtedly runa, one who has always already been such: the subject in an ecology of selves in which beings are persons, or in my words, runakuna with tirakuna exceeding (their *also* being) human and nonhuman entities and thus always already beyond such conditions.

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8.   When writing this comment, I asked Marilyn Strathern what she meant by redundant, and she replied, "I meant that it was unnecessary to add an extra layer of description (adding 'human' to what was already adequately presented as 'person'), my reticence here being precisely the fact that too much baggage came with the term . . ." (Strathern 2014, personal communication).

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