

12-2014

Continuity and the open whole: A comparison of recent (Peircian) ethnographies

Joshua Reno

Binghamton University--SUNY, jreno@binghamton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://orb.binghamton.edu/anthropology_fac



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reno, Joshua, "Continuity and the open whole: A comparison of recent (Peircian) ethnographies" (2014). *Anthropology Faculty Scholarship*. 2.

http://orb.binghamton.edu/anthropology_fac/2

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Continuity and the open whole: A comparison of recent (Peircian) ethnographies

Critique of Anthropology

2015, Vol. 35(2) 220–231

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0308275X15575854

coa.sagepub.com



Kohn, Eduardo, *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2013; 288 pp. ISBN 978-0-5202-7611-6

Pedersen, David, *American value: Migrants, money, and meaning in El Salvador and the United States*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2013; 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-2266-5340-2

Reviewed by: Joshua O Reno, Binghamton University, USA

Introduction

This is a review of two recent ethnographies that deal with the subject of continuity. Not in the usual sense of that term, but rather as one of the many names for the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce, one of the founders of semiotics, of phenomenology, and of pragmatism, though he had uglier names for each of these. As he worked on a critique of Cantor's theory of multitudes, Peirce came to believe that the problem of continuity was central for philosophy as well as mathematics (Potter and Shields, 1977). Peirce's doctrine of synechism held that "all that exists is continuous" (quoted in Mladenov (2006: 29)). In a sense, this is a familiar truism for anthropologists: apparent differences between people dissolve at a sufficient level of generality, such that all seemingly isolated individuals or groups are revealed to be part of one, dynamic totality – whether society, culture, history, humanity, life, and/or the world. For Peirce, such "generals" are not unreal abstractions, but mediate the actual manifestation of any particular. By recognizing the full-fledged reality of unactualized possibilities and general tendencies, Peirce's continuist ontology combined monism and realism in opposition to dualism and nominalism (Noble, 1989).

In this review, I consider the potential importance of Peirce's continuism for anthropology through a comparison of David Pedersen's *American Value* (2013, hereafter AV) and Eduardo Kohn's *How Forest's Think* (2013, hereafter HFT). There are many things to recommend such a comparison. Both books are based on ethnographic research along the Pacific coast of Latin America, among

Intipunqueños of El Salvador and Runa of Ecuador, respectively. And both draw extensively on Peirce, whose ideas they develop in conversation with Marxian value theory and cybernetic systems theory, respectively. Both even independently coin the phrase “open whole” to describe their distinct projects (AV 23; HFT 68). To what sorts of “holism” do they wish anthropologists to be open? And, given their lack of reference to each other’s work, can we, in a decidedly Peircian gesture, find a way to make their separate arguments continuous with one another?

Read together, Pedersen and Kohn suggest a shared theoretical project: to dissolve the categorical divides that currently trouble anthropological theorizing in the acid of Peircian continuity. But this common cause belies real differences about what should be dissolved first and what kind of ethnography should take its place.

The open whole(s)

Early on, both authors explain their take on continuism and its relation to a distinct conception of the open whole. Strictly speaking, monism, continuism, and holism are different ideas, though they are often conflated (Dusek, 1999: 22–26). A monist appreciation for the oneness of being might assume continua that are more or less organized into structured wholes or wholes that are more or less discrete and divisible. In some ways, the slippage between these different senses of “whole” accounts for the very different ways in which Kohn and Pedersen put it to use.

Kohn’s paradigmatic “whole” is symbolic language (and culture more generally) which he characterizes as such in two senses. On the one hand, every particular language is composed of a “contingent system of sign relations” (HFT 39), the meaningfulness of which is thereby complete and self-contained from the standpoint of a specific language community and its speaker–hearers. On the other hand, the general ability to acquire symbolic language is distinctly human and thereby complete and self-contained from the standpoint of *Homo sapiens*. It is partly on the basis of these demarcations, Kohn argues, that anthropologists have imagined human cultures to be “wholes” independent, not only from each other, but also from forms of communication found beyond the human. He proposes to “open” the whole of symbolic language, not to dismiss the uniqueness of humans in particular or in general, nor to reduce the startling diversity of their lifeways to mechanical drives and forces. Rather, Kohn demonstrates how the ecology of the Amazon rainforest is not reducible to evolved instinct, but critically depends on active sign use and interpretation (or semiosis) on the part of human and non-human beings.

If one begins by assuming that only humans have minds, meanings, and purpose, then it is hard to take seriously indigenous Runa discussions of what dogs think or how the masters of the forest foretell future events in dreams. Despite what some claim (Bessire and Bond, 2014), however, Kohn is not like others involved in the so-called ontological turn, who allegedly seek to valorize Amerindian

perspectivism as some kind of neo-primitive antidote to Enlightenment binaries. The “ecology of selves” in the Amazon is not reliant upon Runa cosmology, rather, the reverse is true (HFT 78). The same kind of non-symbolic signs that non-humans and humans use to communicate with and prey upon one another are also the building blocks for the distinctly symbolic semiosis unique to humans. As an open whole, humanity is “both distinct from and continuous with that which lies beyond it” (HFT 9).

Pedersen’s holism is intended to open up space–time and not species. For him,

the real world...has parts, but no ultimate parts. In principle, any individual part, anywhere and any-when, can be divided infinitely...moving outward and backward through all that shaped a part at any moment would lead, through inquiry without limit, to the infinite whole. (AV 22)

Pedersen criticizes the prevailing tendency to divide reality into discontinuous chunks such as “culture” and “political economy” or “history” and “the present.” He begins his book by examining the journalistic and scholarly depiction of “The Intipucá-DC Connection Story” which tends to focus on “the exclusive ties between the [El Salvadoran] town and the DC area wrought by the decades of migration and the exchange of wealth and ways of life across both regions” (AV 7). The result is a dominant narrative of American migrants and money that divides up the hemisphere and obscures its unequal history, thereby reproducing such inequality into the future. Rather than collect or critique such stories, Pedersen seeks to “critically understand *storytelling* as a continuous, combined, and often imbalanced geohistorical process” (AV 9). For this purpose, he also relies on Peircian semiotics, not to distinguish sign types and their hierarchical composition, as does Kohn, but to emphasize the continual development of one sign into another and away from the initial “object” (i.e. the specific historical actions and context) that inaugurated this sign process. An inquiry “without limit” into the Intipucá-DC Connection Story, for example, could trace how it has been shaped by and shapes a more encompassing context of geopolitical relating.

Kohn does not open Runa semiosis to similarly “infinite” hemispheric totalities, but is concerned instead with finding a way to discuss relationships with the Amazonian jungle – and human/nonhuman relations in general – without relying on the categorical division of nature from culture, reducing one to the other, or reuniting them as hyphenated hybrids, as in Latour or Haraway (much like “trans-national,” terms like “nature-culture” could be said to preserve rather than dissolve discontinuity). Pedersen may take the apparent species distinctiveness of storytelling for granted, although he opens it to the equally radical possibilities of an unfolding historical process without limit. Some might be tempted to categorize their open wholes as alternately “political-economic” or “ontological” (especially as discussions of the supposed ontological turn have often been premised, in part, on alleged political or critical inadequacy). Yet both books

engage with power and history and do so with an expanded sense of what counts as real.

Wet theory: Abstraction and form

Peirce's understanding of continuity evolved up to the time of his death, especially in response to Cantorian set theory. One distinguishing feature of his approach to continua is what Zalamea terms the "reflexivity" of their part-whole relations (as quoted in Moore (2007: 428)). According to Peirce, there are no "ultimate parts" among discrete elements of a set because "every part has parts in the same sense" (as quoted in Moore (2007: 428)). But if everything is continuous with everything else, the challenge becomes how to understand the relationship between the actual evidence ethnographer's gather and broader patterns and possibilities of which they are a (relative) part, as well as how to account for the appearance of discontinuity.¹

The two books' dissimilar uses of water imagery offer one way to differentiate their continuist methods. Pedersen begins his book with a quote from Italo Calvino and a meditation on ocean waves breaking on a beach: each successive wave seems to push others and yet is also pushed by them. He characterizes historical ethnography of the open whole as a process of looking backward and outward at ever-more successive waves, thereby commencing a never-ending search for prior cause. For Kohn the paradigmatic watery image is that of a whirlpool in a river. Whirlpools are not reducible to the movement of water that precedes them, but are emergent phenomena, a novel arrangement of underlying chemical and physical components and relations.²

These watery images illustrate different facets of continuity – the endless succession of antecedence and hierarchical emergence, respectively. If Pedersen seeks out antecedent and encompassing conditions of possibility, Kohn decomposes all-too-human characteristics, like language or cosmology, demonstrating how they emerge hierarchically from the surrounding forest, thereby submitting antecedent causes to novel arrangements of matter and mind. Both ethnographers depict continuity as a process whereby a more complicated and variable origin is reduced and simplified into a product. This simpler product they both term "form." Form is an abstraction, but abstraction can be understood in two complementary ways, as dissimulating or as amplifying (Rotman, 1993: 91–92). To put it very simply, one take on abstraction looks backward at what has been lost or forgotten and one looks forward at what is gained.

Pedersen is primarily interested in the dissimulating value forms of capitalist social relations. In Marxian value theory, money is an abstraction that only represents a fraction of what made it possible (i.e. abstract wage labor), while concealing the concrete people, places and historical conditions behind its accretion as capital. It is the same with Peircian signs, which continually grow in such a way that the "immediate object" they represent may become more distant from the initial, "dynamical object" that gave rise to the sign process (AV 14). Herein lies

Pedersen's crucial theoretical innovation: he depicts capitalist value as one dominant form of storytelling which represents its object (the commodity) selectively as abstract wage labor, reflecting a real but highly abstract aspect of its production (i.e. the general capacity for labor necessary for it). This results in yet another story, the commodity's money price, to which it tends to be reduced in capitalist exchange. But this is not the only story possible, nor the only one told. One can reread these dissimulating abstractions for traces of their antecedent conditions. Such "transvaluation," as Pedersen terms and practices it, is a latent potential which allows, "for the same form or sign to shift or expand its immediate object and therefore its meaning" (AV 24). Critiques of capitalism could be said to retell familiar stories about human wealth and worth, depicting their main characters in a new light as *Das Capital* did with the commodity form (see Pedersen, 2008).

Pedersen's ethnographic present is one in which some mobile El Salvadorans are taken to be exemplary "entrepreneurial migrants" whose financial remittances back home increasingly drive domestic and global economic policies. The real representational tendency of capitalist value helps him to account for the partiality of "transnational" stories of migration and money. A motorcycle purchased with remittances and displayed before other Intipunqueños, a photograph of this motorcycle by a traveling journalist, an American newspaper story using this photo to depict the transfer of wealth and prosperity from north to south. Each of these moments are signs that represent successive developments of an object – the actual motorcycle – itself the congealed expression of obscured totalities. By embedding particular, fragmented stories in general habits of storytelling, Pedersen "retroductively" traces their development out of more than a century of interhemispheric relationships. Unpacking each partial story, he moves continuously backward and outward to reckon with broader geohistorical conditions of possibility, through which north and south, rich and poor are repeatedly isolated and reified into discrete parts, the open whole disguised. In this way, Pedersen demonstrates how El Salvadorans could historically suffer from the dissimulating representational tendencies of capitalist value relations, vis-à-vis the powerful north, yet continue to invest in abstracting value forms as objects of desire and possibility. Capitalist stories are not merely a product of concealed inequality, but they help reproduce and spread inequalities across space and time.

In a footnote (AV 19/ff 276), Pedersen briefly distinguishes his approach to value from that of David Graeber, Nancy Munn, and Terrence Turner, which he characterizes as "synchronic." While the synchronic approach may be indispensable for understanding the formation of distinctively Gawan or Kayapo value systems, Pedersen's more diachronic analysis is not (merely) systemic but emphasizes value's continuous development and spread through capitalist production and exchange. Moreover if, for Graeber (2013), value offers the best theoretical means with which to achieve activist ends, Pedersen's conception of *transvaluation* accounts for the possibility of both theory and political action within any system of value, not as discrete projects of engagement but as part of a continuous diachronic series.

For Pedersen, capitalism relies upon a general tendency or continuity that, in theory, dissolves every distinction in the universal equivalent of the money form yet, in practice, reproduces inequality and reifies geopolitical difference. Kohn also relies on a general, form-propagating tendency to mediate ecological relations between the apparently discontinuous organisms of Ecuador. This form arises not from capitalism, but from the far older (yet no less historical) Amazon rainforest, to which even capitalist extraction must occasionally defer, as did the rubber economy of the colonial era (HFT 165). The forest thinks, Kohn proposes provocatively, and the organisms within it are nothing less than the Amazon's (and each other's) living thoughts. Anthropocentrism reinscribes mechanistic visions of a complete nature without novelty or self-ordering properties, within which culture and life could not help but appear like miraculous exceptions. Kohn hopes to blaze a path around these obstacles by discussing the unique sylvan historical ecology of the Amazon, which mediates the lives of everyone, nonhumans, indigenes, and moderns alike. Having opened the whole of symbolic language, Kohn wants to dissolve the discrete category of "life" itself, which means finding examples of its seemingly unique self-organizing properties in nonliving processes, a more encompassing nature to which it is open and upon which it relies.

If the Amazon encourages abstracting habits, it is not primarily as a force of dissimulation, but rather amplification. Amplification reduces what is possible by harnessing a specific parameter. Kohn alludes to amplification earlier in his text, where he explains the importance of iconic indistinction in nonsymbolic and non-human communication (HFT 31). An icon is the most basic sign because it involves ignoring differences and highlighting similarities, as does a creature's camouflage when it convinces a predator to look elsewhere.

Understanding something, however provisional that understanding may be, involves an icon. It involves a thought that is like its object. It involves an image that is a likeness of that object. For this reason all semiosis ultimately relies on the transformation of more complex signs into icons. (HFT 51).

Common reliance on iconicity means that humans can signify in the same way as, and in communication with, nonhuman others. For example, the distinct vocalizations of a loudly barking dog and a loudly shouting human communicate iconically through the simple parameter of volume, present to some degree in all sounds. A loud vocalization amplifies volume so that it stands out prominently in relation to all other vocal qualities. The important point is that, in principle, volume is *formally* distinct from whatever specific meanings these vocalizations might convey. Precisely for this reason, dogs and humans can both harness this underlying parameter in order to convey broadly similar messages (e.g. aggressive intent), which is why humans know to be wary of loudly vocalizing canines and vice versa.

But not all contexts of communication are made equal. "Although all life is semiotic," Kohn writes, "this semiotic quality is amplified and made more apparent in the tropical forest, with its unparalleled kinds and quantities of living selves"

(HFT 78). Precisely because “tropical forests amplify” they can “make more apparent to us, the ways life thinks” (HFT 78). The clearest example of form propagation of the forest comes in Chapter 5, where Kohn discusses how the river system propagates ecological relations that gave shape to both indigenous cosmologies and later systems of colonial extraction. “The rubber boom economy was able to exist and grow,” he argues, “because it united a series of partially overlapping forms, such as predatory chains, plant and animal spatial configurations, and hydrographic networks, by linking the similarities they share” (HFT 165). These “basic regularities” (HFT 165) begin with the “unidirectionally nested river pattern” (HFT 163) of the Amazon, which humans are not alone in harnessing for their survival. Kohn is not indifferent to the violence and enslavement of the colonial rubber regime in Ecuador, but asks only that we recognize how the indifferent forest made this possible.

So it is with the “masters of the forest” so central to Runa participation in the Amazon’s emergent ecology of selves. A cosmological and all-too-human interpretation of this ecology, waking and dreamt encounters with forest masters help Runa develop morally and practically efficacious connections to the forest. But forest masters are also only explicable through awareness of the amplification of predatory tendencies of which they are the formal expression. Indeed, it is only by relating indigenous cosmology to its sylvan origins, Kohn convincingly argues, that we can understand the incorporation of colonial symbolism and history into Runa mythopraxis.

Amazonian abstractions are unforgettable, as if implanted in the minds of all who come into contact with them. Unlike capitalist storytelling, they needn’t conceal and disguise in order to worsen human suffering. But both ethnographers appeal to the realness of these abstract forms and the general habits from which they spring. Colonists and indigenous perspectivists are similarly reliant on form-propagating tendencies beyond any of them, whose “effortless efficacy” (HFT 21) is hard to resist. So it is with North and South Americans involved in narrating and directing the movement of money and people across the hemisphere. In both cases, similarly, form (as opposed to content) plays a significant role in constraining the possibilities of wealth accumulation. If Kohn clarifies what role “nature” has in the extraction of its resources, Pedersen picks up the story from that point on, tracing how accumulated wealth reacts against its originating context as if “external to it” (AV 43). Kohn asks: what accounts for our having crossed a threshold into some continuous yet new domain? And Pedersen: how and why does the new dissimulate the old with which it is continuous?

But these accounts are not merely two halves of a continuous story. Returning to the imagery of the wave, Kohn and Pedersen’s ethnographies of form could be said to emphasize amplitude and wavelength, respectively. If the former takes into account the irresistible power of existence within the wave itself, the latter focuses on its vanishing distinction from the waves preceding and succeeding it. “This only goes in one direction,” Kohn says of the hierarchical process of emergence (HFT 171). But Pedersen stresses how logical retroduction moves in two directions,

“backward and outward,” toward antecedent conditions of possibility. Both focus on the real causal efficacy of an unfolding dynamic. Kohn has a greater appreciation for emergence, that singular shift to a new level from the mere concatenation of signs, where suddenly a difference makes a difference (see Rotman, 1993: 107). Pedersen’s approach may be more transportable across varying contexts of research, more methodologically replicable, while Kohn’s appears intentionally rooted in the Amazon in particular. What of these discontinuities?

Discontinuities and discussion

Reading these books together, I imagine the questions the authors might ask one another:

Pedersen: Do you not overemphasize the influence of the Amazon by selectively amplifying Runa indigeneity, rather than the relative “modernity” of Some Other Amazonians and Runa themselves (Nugent and Harris, 2004)? Why don’t you show the historical emergence of the discrete “Amazon,” which surely exists globally as a story and an abstract form in many ways you have not explicated?

Kohn: I am also interested in the temporality of the Amazon, as a thought, but my space–time is folded into the present, nested, in the same way the ontogenetic development of a fetus recapitulates its phylogenetic descent. The Amazon is not discrete, but it is an emergent real like your capitalism. The failure to realize this is what currently endangers the “lungs of the Earth,” is it not?

Why don’t you “transvalue” the ability of human’s to tell us stories? After all, an infinite spatio-temporal continuum would surely lead us back to the very emergence of the first story, its first distillation of form from non-human realities.

P: The process of interpretation is infinite. The point is not to go on infinitely, however, but to make choices about the continua one selects in order to undo false and harmful discontinuities. Reading your account, one is left wondering: how could it not have been so? Is this the best antidote to the abstraction and extraction of the Amazon today? What has been dissimulated, what lost in how people represent trees representing water? With this take on Peirce one might recognize the irony that capitalist value forms are now destroying the very rainforest that made possible their emergent abstraction, as they have in Ecuador.

K: Perhaps. But your account leaves us wondering: what new stories await us? What else could emerge? You hint, for example, that coffee is itself a dissimulation of the sun’s energy (AV 69). What other than human abstractions made possible El Salvadoran coffee plantations and facilitated enduring hemispheric inequalities? Could this not represent a further condition of possibility, an amoral antecedent to value formation?

P: Perhaps. But can your approach really be done anywhere else? I am skeptical of your use of the Amazon as a uniquely distinct fieldsite when, as Peirce shows us, every-where must be continuous with many-wheres.

Here I will stop this exercise, not to give my imaginary Pedersen the last word, but because I hope that it is clear what both approaches can and might still add to one another, not in violation of their continuist ethos but as a further development of it.

Some of the contrasts I have magnified for the sake of explication are unfair. Pedersen's account is also "nonhuman" insofar as all-too-human creations like value and money price take on a vampiric life of their own. And perhaps an emphasis on nonhuman forms becomes less important as forest is cut down for farms? El Salvador has lost a greater percentage of its primary rainforest than almost any country in Latin America, after all. But, in fact, Kohn's exploration of nonhuman webs is no more exhaustive than Pedersen's impossibly infinite endeavor. Consider what the former says about the uniqueness of the Amazon, for example:

The interrelations among so many different semiotic life-forms in this dense ecology of selves result in a relatively more nuanced and exhaustive overall representation of the surrounding environment when compared to the way life represents elsewhere on the planet. That is, the "thoughts" of a tropical forest come to represent the world in a relatively more detailed way. (HFT 81)

Could the same not also be said about terrestrial life in general? After all, there is arguably greater ecological density beyond the ocean depths, on land, where to survive unsuspending organisms had to develop intricate new forms of predation and parasitism (see McMenamin and McMenamin, 1996). Perhaps the surface of the earth is, in general, a good fieldsite for an anthropology of the nonhuman.

Some would undoubtedly characterize Pedersen's as the more "political" of the two books, due to its application of Marxian analyses of capitalism. Like Eric Wolf and Fernando Coronil, Pedersen reminds anthropologists of the political consequences of the all-but-compulsory methodological decision to choose a singular "fieldsite," which presupposes a privileged divide of field from study and conveniently renders the lives of the site's inhabitants as discretely located in time and space. At the same time, Pedersen further demonstrates how much can be gained by dissolving the enduring scholarly distinction between the really political and the merely cultural. Indeed, no worthwhile account or critique of capital can ignore the coproduction of stores and stories of value.

Kohn writes just as much about the nightmarish weight of dead generations, moreover. Both ethnographers seem to recognize death as apparent discontinuity at its most palpable, objectification into the ultimate other ("dead meat" as Runa say). For Pedersen, the suffering of the living and the dead is evident in stories of persecution and poverty, but is often misrepresented or silenced as part of national storytelling. Among Runa, Kohn explains, the dead are part of the ecology of selves, just as killing is a critical practice of (non)relating. Human continuity with the no longer living is here linked to continuity of an "I" with an "us" (HFT 196). Indeed, El Salvadoran dead could be seen in a similar way, as an

emergent ecology of selves that continue to weigh down history. But, not all Ecuadoran dead are so amplified. The Runa ecology of spirits does not seem to include slain and enslaved Hoarani, neighbors and enemies to the Runa, for instance. If Hoarani do not become masters of the forest, as do Runa kith and kin, this might indicate the dissimulating side of the Runa cosmology of relating, a more general “us” that has not yet become.

It is also true that Kohn offers new avenues for the critique of capitalism. In an earlier passage, he describes a moment of anxiety brought about by one particularly unsettling sojourn to his fieldsite and a lack of connection to his fellow travelers. He associates the detachment and panic he felt with symbolic language and its apparent closure, which appeared to be the case when he availed himself of nonsymbolic forms of communication to recover from his experience. As he writes, “symbolic thought run wild can make us experience ‘ourselves’ as set apart from everything: our social contexts, the environments in which we live, and ultimately even our desires and dreams” (HFT 50). Could one not characterize the real representational tendency of capitalist value as precisely “symbolic thought run wild,” which would explain the individualist greed it seems to foster? In this sense, contemporary neoliberalism would seem to represent a political expression of the anxious solipsism that afflicted Kohn. Like Kohn, William Connolly (2013) also draws on the work of Terrence Deacon, but he does so precisely in order to criticize neoliberal ideology, which tends to assume that only markets possess self-organizing tendencies. In order to do so, Connolly focuses on stories of humankind and self-organization passed on by neoliberal thinkers like Hayek. He thus shows, in a way similar to Pedersen, how neoliberal storytelling selectively (mis)represents its objects.

Conclusion

Unlike similarly ambitious 19th century philosophies (Husserl’s, for example), there remains a kind of playful joy associated with drawing upon the Peircian corpus, as if it could be developed in any direction for any purpose. In some ways, this speaks to the breadth and constant growth of Peirce’s ideas during his lifetime, but it is also arguably a consequence of there being no Heidegger and Derrida to Peirce’s Husserl, that is, no established tradition of exegetical destruction and deconstruction to make American anthropologists as skeptical of pragmatism as they are of presence (but see Hacking, 2007). For three decades – roughly from Silverstein (1976) to Keane (2007) – Peircian anthropologists have continually felt the need to reexplain to their audiences the difference between Peircian sign and Saussurean signifier, as well as the definitions of icon, index, and symbol. Thirty years of teaching readers how to count to three before one can begin an argument! And yet, rather than see this as an unfortunate symptom of continued neglect of Peirce’s writings, one could claim that this is precisely what makes Peirce an attractive interlocutor for so many. No stodgy Derrida has interfered with anthropological play and dissemination, which means that Peirce’s ideas

can be reinterpreted again and again as alternately Saussurean, Heideggerian, Jakobsonian, Latourian, cybernetic, or Marxian.

By drawing on Peirce's continuist thinking, Pedersen and Kohn are not just adding two new reinterpretations to the mix but are appealing to the very core of Peircian ontology. More importantly, they do so at a time when interest in dissolution of categorical divides is widespread. But Pedersen and Kohn also show how differently this demand can be met. Continuity means that seemingly opposed categories like human/nonhuman are understood as part of more encompassing processes, an expanded "us" (HFT 68). Continuity also means that seemingly distant places and times are actually wound together as part of more encompassing storytelling habits, an expanded when and where. That is, continuity from place to place and moment to moment, as opposed to continuity between distinct levels of emergence. But this formal relationship between the texts belies the independent power of their ethnographic analyses, their invitation to imagine novel continuities, of space-time, of kind, which open up methodological possibilities in turn. Both Pedersen and Kohn are difficult to pin down and span various disciplinary divides, but they share an interest in the reality of general patterns, not the obfuscating appeal of "irreducible complexity" (HFT 19) or "random chaos" (AV 23). In a line that could have appeared in either book, Kohn writes, "complexity, context, and entanglement can themselves become the objects of ethnographic analysis rather than the unquestioned conditions for it" (HFT 14).

But continuism, rigorously applied, can make any analysis start to appear like that which it is not (and from which it is only ever *relatively* distinct in the first place). Continual storytelling places objects under erasure, focusing on their representation through chains of semiosis. The retroductive "opening" of stories makes them vanish into an infinite spatio-temporal horizon, just as antecedent waves eventually begin to melt into the whole of the ocean. And yet, by the end of Pedersen's book the transvaluation of previous stories brings with it the possibility of novel change, emergence. By the end of Kohn's book, conversely, emergence is so well accounted for that the effortless efficacy of form seems almost like a forgone conclusion, a fulfillment of an antecedent cause and not something new. I point out these seeming paradoxes for the same reason I have placed these texts into conversation, because for me their ideas are very much alive and, as Peirce said of all symbols, should continue to grow.

Notes

1. Though not explicitly in conversation with Peircian philosophy, Strathern (1991) uses the model of "Cantor's dust" in a related way in order to complicate anthropological tropes of comparison.
2. Tim Ingold also uses water as a fluid metaphor for the relational becoming of living creatures: "We could regard the organism. . . as a kind of eddy or whirl. . . endlessly creating itself in the current of life, just as the water of a stream, without any kind of template or central direction, forms itself into ripples, droplets and vortices" (2013: 18). Terrence Deacon, like Kohn, uses the spontaneous emergence of whirlpools to illustrate form

propagation (2012: 255). However, Deacon is careful to distinguish nonbiological morphodynamic processes from evolved *teleodynamics* consisting of “the capacity for self-repair and self-replication” (2012: 270). The continuation of a virtual, living “self,” formally distinguishable from all its repairs and replications, is why organisms and environments can mix so thoroughly without completely dissolving into each other, at least until teleodynamics give way to death.

References

- Bessire L and Bond D (2014) Ontological anthropology and the deferral of critique. *American Ethnologist* 41: 440–456.
- Connolly W (2013) *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies and Democratic Activism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Deacon T (2012) *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Dusek V (1999) *The Holistic Inspiration of Physics: The Underground History of Electromagnetic Theory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Graeber D (2013) It is value that brings the universes into being. *Hau* 3: 219–243.
- Hacking I (2007) On not being a pragmatist: Eight reasons and a cause. In: Misak C (ed.) *New Pragmatists*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 32–49.
- Ingold T (2013) “Prospect.”. In: Ingold T and Palsson G (eds) *Biosocial Becomings: Integrating Social and Biological Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–21.
- Keane W (2007) *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- McMenamin MA and McMenamin DLS (1996) *Hypersea: Life on Land*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mladenov I (2006) *Conceptualizing Metaphors: On Charles Peirce’s Marginalia*. Oxford and New York: Routledge.
- Moore ME (2007) The genesis of the Peircian continuum. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43: 425–469.
- Noble NAB (1989) Peirce’s definitions of continuity and the concept of possibility. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 25: 149–174.
- Nugent S and Harris M (eds) (2004) *Some Other Amazonians: Perspectives on Modern Amazonia*. London: University of London, Institute for the Study of the Americas.
- Pedersen D (2008) Brief event: The value of getting to value in the era of “globalization.” *Anthropological Theory* 8: 57–77.
- Potter V and Shields PB (1977) Peirce’s definitions of continuity. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 13: 20–34.
- Rotman B (1993) *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Silverstein M (1976) Shifters, linguistic categories and cultural description. In: Basso K and Selby H (eds) *Meaning in Anthropology*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, pp. 11–55.
- Strathern M (1991) *Partial Connections*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.