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## Amazonia in the Anthropocene: Peoples, Soils, Plants, Forests

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*Amazonia in the Anthropocene: Peoples, Soils, Plants, Forests* by Nicholas Kawa, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016. xiii+186 pp., illustrations, notes, references, index.

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Drastic environmental change has compelled researchers and scholars across disciplines to propose that the Holocene is being supplanted by a new geologic epoch, the *Anthropocene*, characterized by anthropogenic influences on the Earth's ecosystems. This onset of humanity's planetary domination is often pegged at the invention of the Watt steam engine and the ensuing Industrial Revolution. However, what purchase can these ideas attain in Amazonia—a region with widely accepted histories of pre-Columbian anthropogenic landscape modification (Balée 2013) and a wealth of scholarship recognizing the agency of non-humans in determining environmental futures (Descola 1996; Kohn 2013)? Nicholas Kawa's *Amazonia in the Anthropocene* challenges the conceptual foundations of the Anthropocene concept through a critique of how it frames human history and our relationships to other species. Theoretically inspired by post-humanist approaches, this book is an ethnography well-grounded in rich empirical descriptions of daily lives and real places, with an emphasis on the role played by assemblages of humans and other beings in the production of environmental conditions.

The bulk of field research that generated the data analyzed in the book was conducted in the municipality of Borba on the Madeira River, Amazonas State, Brazil, about 150 km southeast of the city of Manaus. Visits and extended stays in upland and floodplain subsistence communities around nearby Lake Puruzinho supply the ethnographic kernels that impart a materiality critical to a bottom-up evaluation of the Anthropocene concept. At a modest 131 pages of text, Kawa provides a wealth of detail and well-researched historical accounts, but the intentions that drive his thesis are fairly straightforward: to decenter the “anthropos” from the Anthropocene; to explain the eurocentrism of its characterization and complicate the qualitative exceptionality of its post-steam engine commencement; and to discourage the Cartesian dualisms that it reproduces.

The words of the book's subtitle, “Peoples, Soils, Plants, Forests,” correspond to those of the main data chapters, which are bookended by an introduction and conclusion, and followed by an appendix that inventories dozens of botanical species Kawa surveyed in Borba. In the chapter, “Peoples,” we start to learn about the local community's extensive ecological knowledge through a description of their fishing techniques and also learn about their economic agility as fluvial traders. We also begin to understand Kawa's critique of the eurocentrism and anthropocentrism that undergirds the Anthropocene narrative: it dismisses the role that the peasants of Borba, and Amazonians elsewhere, played in supplying natural rubber to the nations and machines that fueled the Industrial Revolution. What may seem like trivial historical neglect becomes more crucial when understood as emblematic of a worldview that regards subsistence peoples and their practices as irrelevant to the future, or whose “present is seen as something of the past” (p. 48). Local ecological perception in Borba acknowledges the challenges presented by the environment, but conceptualizes their solutions as negotiations, rather than domination.

Archaeologists and historians will appreciate the next chapter, “Soils,” for its introduction to *terra preta* (Amazonian dark earth) via an examination of the nineteenth-century origins of North American archaeology in the Amazon basin. Kawa's historical recounting combines the Victorian-era travel writings of Pedro Texeira, the curiosity of the Canadian geologist Charles Hartt, the communiqué of the Museu Goeldi's founder Domingo Soares Ferreira Penna, and the unlikely participation of an ex-confederate of the U.S. Civil War named Romulus Rhome (pp. 51–55). The story describes anthropogenic change that happened well before a steam engine brought any of these characters into contact. The chapter also discusses recent technocratic proposals to replicate the

biochar found in *terra preta* for purposes of large-scale agricultural intensification and carbon sequestration (pp. 65–70). Scaling the *terra preta* model from smallholders in rural Amazonia up to industrial farming epitomizes, I believe, one of Kawa’s central contentions with the anthropocentrism embedded in the Anthropocene concept: with appropriate technological knowledge, humans can reengineer the planet’s ecological systems and work them to full advantage. In a cautionary tone, he suggests that socio-political systems that do not *value* dancing with the agency of their material worlds may risk dangerous or unintended consequences (p.70). In other words, a technological solution cannot fit into the conceptual shoes of a stranger.

In “Plants,” Kawa continues to analyze non-human agency through a discussion of the social lives of household plant species and their magical qualities for the locals with whom many co-exist. Through a combination of Western botanical science and local perception, Kawa details how some of these plants depend on humans for propagation, while others colonize human space for the simple company that co-mingling provides, as they could easily survive in the absence of human management (p. 91).

Finally, the chapter “Forests” contains Kawa’s most pointed intervention regarding the Anthropocene concept and certain anthropological scholarship about Amazonia. While the research program of historical ecology recognizes the dialogic relations between humans and forests, it falls short of elucidating their complex histories of interaction. Furthermore, the designation of a forest as either anthropogenic or natural creates a secondary “natural-nature” dualism that sits awkwardly atop the “cultural-nature” binary, thereby obfuscating the ways forests resist human control and falling prey to the propensity to overstate human intentionality in environmental transformation (pp. 94–97).

But how to move beyond the subordination of either end of the “nature/culture” polarity and still avoid a determinative ontological distinction between the two? To start, Kawa proposes a tripartite perspective that considers a forest’s biography in terms of distinct dimensions: the archaeological (material evidence and archaeological soils), the ecological (species dispersion), and the historical (use, management, and oral histories) (pp. 101–102). The last of these dimensions was, perhaps, inspired by a key experience during the research for this ethnography: repeated hearings of the story of the *Cobra Grande*, a massive mythical snake of Amazonian folklore and indigenous oral tradition whose wanderings explain otherwise mysterious topography, such as intra-island channels and dried up creek beds (104–108). The oral tradition of *Cobra Grande* shapes local environmental perception and makes the landscape’s anomalies understandable; but for Kawa, it is also a reminder that landscapes are constantly in flux, transformed by other-than-human forces.

*Amazonia in the Anthropocene* is a concise and well-structured ethnography. Kawa’s deft use of post-humanism enables him to theoretically ground empirical data to produce an accessible read suitable for both undergraduate and graduate courses in Amazonian studies, the Anthropocene, environmental anthropology and ethnography. As the term “Anthropocene” slowly sheds its buzzword status for standard parlance, cautionary perspectives like those presented here will become increasingly relevant. The book does not contest the notion that we are in the midst of an ecological crisis. Rather, it declares that we are suffering from a crisis in ecological thinking.

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