Planned and unplanned urban sprawl in megalopolises like Mumbai and Kolkata is the product of rapidly expanding populations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as political economic decisions made under neoliberal capitalism by Indian authorities. Tower blocks, highways, market centers, and crowded streets exist to facilitate flows of capital and ferry workers to offices, petrochemical refineries, and banks that were never made for unruly nonhuman animals. Sundhya Walther’s investigation into the disruptive creatures—including monkeys, dogs, tigers, and praying mantises—and the revered companion species, particularly cows, that roam into contemporary Indian literature and society is a careful study of “disorderly multispecies living” (p. 12). Disorder here refers to the figurative and literal points of contact—touch and the sharing of proximate bodily space—made between nonhumans and humans that transgress colonial-era and Enlightenment norms of capitalist modernity. In her investigation into a corpus of contemporary Indian novels, memoirs, and philosophical treatises, Walther aims to raise questions about disorderly human-animal entanglements and point toward how these uneasy relations undermine any neat human-animal division either in practice or in thought.

At the start, Walther identifies several intellectual traditions and theoretical frameworks that her work reconsiders and expands on. The first is “postcolonial humanism,” a term marked out by Anand Pandian (*Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India* [2009]) to refer to the ways the human or humanity are categories defined by their opposites: animals and animality. In the philosophical view of contemporary Europe and the West, Indians and other formerly colonized people have been deemed nonhuman and must attain humanity by enforcing the nature-culture boundaries of the moderns, as so aptly characterized by Bruno Latour (*We Have Never Been Modern* [1993]).

Rejecting the epistemological legacies of colonialism, then, requires refusing to adopt the Western frame of the singular human—or “Man” in Sylvia Wynter’s analysis—and here Walther joins a cohort of critics of now-classic postcolonial thinkers in the wake of Frantz Fanon, such as Julietta Singh and Neel Ahuja, who are calling for a more critical engagement with ideas like the “human” or “animal.”[1] Adding to this trajectory,
Walther aims to analyze “productive points of alliance between nonhuman animals and human subalterns” as ethical subjects (p. 10). In terms of its methodology, Multispecies Modernity draws on concepts from the environmental humanities, such as “multispecies contact zones,” and Walther’s own “non-devouring reading practice” intended to resist a strictly humanist approach to animals in literature by approaching animals in texts as always-already representations of actual animals that cannot be simply reduced to or only understood as metaphors, literary devices, or symbols (pp. 19, 28).

The origins of tiger conservation within British colonialism provides a starting point for analyzing the origins and evolution of a human-animal binary in India. In the opening chapter, Walther conducts a close reading of Jim Corbett’s Man-Eaters of Kumaon (1944) and Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide (2004). Corbett’s 1944 memoir of hunting tigers in the Kumaon division of Uttarakhand is an exemplary text of imperial conservation and British colonial masculinity. Drawing on multisensory studies, Walther points out how Corbett’s text imposes the ocularity of colonialism—the physical and cultural policing of normal human-tiger relations as maintained by visual and bodily distance—and the threatening touch of “felid teeth and human flesh” when tigers breach human bodies (p. 41). Corbett’s later turn from hunter to conservationist reestablished his role as a colonial policeman, as in both cases his role—as defined by the British government of India, which granted him the “Freedom of Forests” privilege—rested on enforcing a rigid spatial distance between Indians and tigers. Tigers appear in Ghosh’s novel in an altogether different mode: as animals that use their sonic vocal presence to disturb the scientific rationality of the scientist characters in the novel and center “subaltern spirituality” (p. 60). Ghosh’s novel is set in the Sundarbans, a mangrove forest zone of intersecting islands, mudflats, and tidal waterways in the Bay of Bengal, and introduces the tiger as one among many lively nonhumans that upset the modern division of nature-culture, including river dolphins, demons, crabs, gods, and plants. The Hungry Tide, then, represents a kind of counter-modernity where humans must share space with animals without forcing anthropocentric categories of proximity.

Eating animal bodies and the ethical and political questions raised by vegetarianism are at the center of Mohandas K. Gandhi’s philosophy developed in the late 1920s and the nationalist agenda of the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, since the 2010s. Situating the body itself as a site for interpreting multispecies contact, this second chapter looks at Gandhi’s An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth, first published in the United States in 1948, and Vikram Chandra’s Red Earth and Pouring Rain (1995). Walther situates the Gandhian philosophy of ahimsa, nonviolence to all living beings, as a redress against the modernist nature-culture division instituted by British colonialism. Yet she also points out how ahimsa, satyagraha (nonviolent resistance), and the practice of vegetarianism exulted by Gandhi are presently mobilized by Hindutva nationalists within the BJP to recreate a boundary between Hindus and Muslims in India, a boundary that is troublingly defined by cultural norms around eating animals. Looking at Chandra’s novel, which centers on the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and the issue of carnivory, Walther considers how the origins of India as a unified, independent nation are “necessarily exclusionary and [are] reliant on the subjugation of its others,” namely, Muslims (p. 107). This chapter’s analysis of Red Earth and Pouring Rain is particularly valuable for understanding how vegetarianism and nonviolence—and the overt human-animal relations embedded in Gandhian philosophy—have become powerful tools for producing a new binary, the Hindu-Muslim division, that functions not unlike its colonial modernist antecedent.
Turning to domestic space, and the presence of companion animals or the ingress of unwanted critters, affords a window onto the “repressed traumas” of Indian independence (p. 116). Here Walther looks at Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and R. K. Narayan’s *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961). Walther zooms in on the “troubled partition” between animal and human domiciles as these pertain to ideas surrounding gender and the nation. In Desai’s novel, set in the Civil Lines neighborhood of Old Delhi during the Emergency period between 1975 and 1977, Walther interprets episodes involving attacks on animals, such as a carthorse and a stray dog, as moments of “unvoiced” violence (p. 133). In her reading of the novel, Walther argues that animals become sites of “resistance to meaning” through their refusal to present any clear moral or ethical content for the characters. Likewise, the repressed traumas of the nation in postindependence India and after Partition are quite literally on display in the rotting taxidermied animals that fill *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. In her analysis, the critic sees the failure of taxidermied specimens—including iconic tigers—as a literal inability to stabilize or improve nature, a key sine qua non of the British colonial regime and modern capital.

Moving out to the cityscape and its multispecies crowds, the final chapter raises questions regarding the denizens of modern Indian literature. Here Walther examines the city as a “site of transfection,” wherein multispecies’ interactions transgress the colonial legacies of “hygienic modernity” (term from Ruth Rogaski’s *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* [2014]). In this final chapter, the book turns to analyzing Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) and the contemporary lives of leopards in Sanjay Gandhi National Park located in Mumbai. In fiction and in reality, wild leopards and street dogs are, borrowing Mary Douglas’s now-canonical phrase, “matter out of place” of the neoliberal vision for global capital (p. 169). This becomes clear in *The White Tiger*, in which human characters become waste-like through discourses of animalization, rendering them being treated “like a donkey” to be worked to exhaustion or pushed to become like a “tiger” living outside the bounds of human society (p. 178). In the same manner, the real leopards that occasionally attack human visitors to Sanjay Gandhi National Park are depicted as a natural punishment for the “excessive” or wasteful growth of the “tiger economy” of Mumbai as it exploded since the 1990s. Garbage dumps throughout the city lure leopards, along with rats, pigs, and other animals, outside of parklands toward human habitations. Leopard attacks in Mumbai are further discursively likened to forms of “contagion,” despite their mitigating the threat of rabies by checking dog populations (p. 203).

Interspersed between each chapter are three short “provocations” involving the work of Indian visual artists: Sakshi Gupta, Sujatro Ghosh, and Jagannath Panda. In each of these short interludes between the major chapters, the author considers artworks as diverse as “elephants” made from salvaged waste materials to photographs of women wearing cow masks and collages crowded with hyenas and pigeons. Each provocation is thematically and conceptually linked to the chapters, and Walther fuses theoretical frameworks to connect the texts to the artworks.

A postscript on the zoo is an ongoing invitation for future “non-devouring” readings and leaves open spaces for ethical investigations. Walther recounts a 2014 incident involving a human death at the National Zoological Park in Delhi, which involved a white tiger. Here she concludes by asking how readers might understand even this event as a complicated moment, given that the white tiger, named “Vikram” and implied to be a Hindu or at least associated with Hindu culture, attacked and killed a Muslim man, Masqood, who may have been intoxicated or experiencing an episode of mental illness. Again the human-animal binary reappears alongside the
Hindu-Muslim binary as another division between these two subjects.

*Multispecies Modernity* is impressive given Walther's ability to weave concepts from literary studies to history, ethics, aesthetics, and critical animal studies. The book's theoretical sophistication and clarity are admirable, given the range of theorists discussed, including Homi Bhaba, Carol J. Adams, Partha Chatterjee, Anat Pick, and Donna Haraway. Moreover, one of the book's critical strengths is Walther's ability to unpack the function of senses—especially sight, smell, and sound—in the novels under scrutiny. One real missed opportunity, it seems, is the lack of engagement with the rich literature on pests and vermin in environmental history developed by historians like Mary Fissell, Matthew Mulcahy and Stuart Schwartz, and Dawn Day Biehler.[2] Perhaps this is unfair given that the book is a work of literary criticism, yet readers may wonder why Walther's careful analysis of the concept of “animal” itself is not further explicated via these cultural categories for the animals that defy and upset human norms and order. Furthermore, while the discussion of artworks in the provocations is interesting, these points may have been more suitably integrated into the chapters to add greater flow to the text. Nevertheless, the book is a valuable contribution to critical animal studies, Indian literature, and cultural analyses of more-than-human environments.

Notes


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