



4-15-2022

## Translating Across Difference: Affect, Animal Studies, and Anthropology

Radhika Govindrajan  
*University of Washington*

Qingfei Zhang

Morgan Keith Stewart  
*University of Kentucky*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.30.08>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Animal Studies Commons](#), and the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



### Recommended Citation

Govindrajan, Radhika; Zhang, Qingfei; and Stewart, Morgan Keith (2022) "Translating Across Difference: Affect, Animal Studies, and Anthropology," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*: Vol. 30, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.30.08>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol30/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to [disclosurejournal@gmail.com](mailto:disclosurejournal@gmail.com)

## Translating Across Difference: Affect, Animal Studies, and Anthropology

An Interview with Radhika Govindrajan, *University of Washington*

Interviewers: Qingfei Zhang and Morgan Keith Stewart, *University of Kentucky*

*Radhika Govindrajan is a cultural anthropologist who works across the fields of multispecies ethnography, environmental anthropology, the anthropology of religion, South Asian Studies, and political anthropology. Her research is motivated by a longstanding interest in understanding how human relationships with nonhumans in South Asia are variously drawn into and shape broader issues of cultural, political, and social relevance: religious nationalism; elite projects of environmental conservation and animal-rights; everyday ethical action in a time of environmental decline; and people's struggle for social and political justice in the face of caste discrimination, patriarchal domination, and state violence and neglect. Govindrajan's first book, Animal Intimacies [University of Chicago Press, 2018; Penguin Random House India, 2019] is an ethnography of multispecies relatedness in the Central Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India. It was awarded the 2017 American Institute of Indian Studies Edward Cameron Dimock Prize in the Indian Humanities and the 2019 Gregory Bateson Prize, by the Society for Cultural Anthropology.*

**Qingfei Zhang (QZ):** *What led you to animal studies and what interested you in animal studies in the central Himalayas?*

**Radhika Govindrajan (RG):** I think that animal studies is a capacious field at this point, but within anthropology specifically, doing animal studies means taking very seriously animals' social and political lives. Stefan Helmreich and Eben Kirksey, who you read last week, argue that doing animal studies or doing multispecies ethnography entails thinking of animals as subjects who have legible biographical and political lives. So, that's one of the central tenets of animal studies; that we understand the subjectivity of animals and understand and treat animals as subjects who are agents in their own rights, with their own intentions, capacities, and tendencies. We take those seriously in terms of how they shape the kinds of social worlds that they inhabit alongside humans and a variety of other critters.

I think it also means taking seriously the question of animal life and welfare, which can often be a difficult question, given that it's entangled with human lives and welfare in ways that can sometime be oppositional. Scholars, particularly in the field of critical race studies, have pointed out this before: we have to be careful not to engage in celebratory rhetoric that argues we are all post-human now and that there is a move beyond the human because there are still so many groups, particularly historically marginalized people, who are still trying to claim the category of human. I'm thinking here of the work of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, who argues that the post-human narrative erases the particular experience of Blackness and the ways in which Black subjects are trying to claim humanism and that to now move past the human feels like another move to erase the Black experience. And I think that is a critique that we have to take very seriously. I'm also thinking of the work of scholars such as Bénédictine Boisseron, who has a book

called *Afro-Dog* where she looks at PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] campaigns that suggest that factory farming is the new slavery. She argues that a lot of this work within certain domains of animal studies erases, again, the violence that has been caught up in people's relationships with animals, and that we have to think about the specificity of these relationships across time and space and account for the experience of race, caste, and gender within that specifically. So, I think there is also a sense that any animal studies work should focus on these broader politics and struggle with that question of what it means to think simultaneously about animal welfare and the welfare of *particular* humans.

For me, animal studies within anthropology also means thinking about ethnography as a theory and method that takes seriously non-human subjects and to think about what might an ethnography that takes animals as subjects seriously look like, what that does to our conception of what an ethnography is, how it is practiced, and the questions of translation that come up when you think about animals as ethnographic subjects. I've found that kind of writing tremendously productive. I'm thinking of the work of Marisol de la Cadena, who talks about the difficulties of translation within ethnographic work with humans, but I'm thinking about how that might be extended also to ethnographic work with non-humans. What are the challenges of translating across difference? And how might we think of translation, as de la Cadena puts it, as a kind of translation work that is not hungry for commensuration, that doesn't seek completion, that is always incomplete.

**QZ:** *I am also very interested in the kind of affect in your studies, the ways that you give animals a real political and biological life that makes them speak to the reader. What could you say about the connection between affect and animal studies and how the two can be combined in anthropology?*

**RG:** Affect theory has been really ascendant within the humanities and social sciences for a while now, and I like thinking of affect as a kind of embodied intensity that emerges at the intersection of different kinds of bodies. Within anthropology, I've found the work of Juno Parreñas really influential. She has been thinking particularly about how affect emerges at the intersection of laboring and gendered bodies. This kind of work points us in the direction of what we might do with affect. I'm also thinking about how affects emerge differentially across differently raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies as well, so not just unmarked bodies but specifically how affect traverses this kind of distinctions and emerges differentially in those kinds of spaces.

I think affect within animal studies is also a way of destabilizing the emphasis on language. One of the challenges in animal studies is how you can think about forms of communication that don't rely on speech. I find the work of Donna Haraway, Barbara Smuts, Vinciane Despret, and Parreñas really influential in thinking of communication as affective and embodied and thinking through those kinds of affects about the ways in which different kinds of bodies come to be constituted in relation to one another - which is one of the central themes of the book: how does one actually think of co-constitution - which is Haraway's term -

ethnographically? How does that occur in ethnographic contexts? What are the kinds of material affect relationships through which that co-constitution can proceed? I think affect theory is really powerful there.

I've also relied very heavily on the work of Sara Ahmed who theorizes affect in her work on happiness but also in other writing of hers about what it might mean to think of intercorporeal exchanges more closely, to think about what it means to be drawn into the sphere of another, and what that drawing in and what that inclusion in another's sphere might do to the self. For me, that has been a really productive way to think about affect within animal studies.

**QZ:** *You are a trained anthropologist, and you use anthropology to do animal studies in the central Himalayas. Could you please elaborate on the kind of entanglements between both disciplines: the kind of perspectives that anthropology gives you in animal studies and how animal studies intervenes in the methodology of anthropology?*

**RG:** Great questions. To your first question, I think anthropology has had a very long history of being interested in people's relationships with the non-human world. [Lewis] H. Morgan has a book called *The American Beaver and His Works*, where he thinks about the sociality of the beaver and its ability to construct built environments. There's that kind of early work, but there's also people like [Sir Edward Evan] Evans-Pritchard who are taking very seriously the relationships that the Nuer have with the cattle that they raise. He writes quite movingly about the taking on of ox names by young men, the hours that Nuer people spend grooming their cattle, and the kinds of intimate relationships that emerge with them over the course of caring for them, and eventually killing them. I think that interest in relationality and intimacy and kinship starts very early in anthropology.

But what's different in this moment is taking seriously, as I said, the idea that animals are subjects with their own consciousness, with their own trajectories and tendencies, and that they play an active part in shaping those social worlds. They are not just symbols or just objects that people can project their feelings onto; they play an active part in creating these social worlds. There is increasing interest in how the social worlds that we inhabit, to quote Anna Tsing, are constructed through the "world-building labor" of a variety of social beings. I like this idea that we have to think about the labor that different beings do in constructing the worlds that we inhabit. I think that is where anthropology's interest in the non-human currently is.

[Anthropology is now] also taking seriously the politics of all this. I think one recent move has been to critique some of the implicit romanticization of the entanglement literature, the multispecies literature. And there are significant exceptions, but Elizabeth Roberts, for example, argues that the entanglement literature has this sort of romantic connotation to it, that entanglement is a way out of the rigid binaries of human/non-human and that it takes apart some of the hubris of humanism. She argues that entanglement produces its own violence. This is something that I found very interesting as well because, working in a context like India, it's very hard to paint a rosy picture of multispecies relatedness, particularly at a time when right-wing

movements are also using the language of multispecies relatedness to exclude other kinds of humans from that world. I'm thinking specifically of the politics of cow-protection, which uses claims to Hindu kinship with cows to violently exclude Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, and Christians from a Hindu body politic. So, I think that increasingly there is within anthropology a recognition that we also have to be careful about the political valence of claims about multispecies entanglements, but that also we have to think seriously about the politics of multispecies entanglements in different cases. So that answers your first question.

How has animal studies affected the methodology of anthropology? I think I was gesturing at that when I was thinking about what it means to do ethnography with non-humans. Ethnography as a method has been so centered on the idea that the only interlocutors of the anthropologists are human, and I believe thinking about interlocutors as non-human opens up a whole other range of issues: [for example], of speech, as I pointed out. How do you actually talk to these interlocutors? I think that work on embodied communication and trusting your instinct [is relevant here], which is something that Brian Massumi points out, that perhaps one way to move past humanism is to give in to instinct, which humans often set aside for reason. But if one were to privilege instinct, then speech wouldn't be such a barrier. That is one way in which animal studies has affected the practice and the method of ethnography. [Another way is by making us think] about translation and writing and taking seriously the perspectives of non-humans. Thom van Dooren has done some really interesting work on narrative among non-humans, and he looks at how penguins construct narratives and points out that it's not just humans who tell stories. Other kinds of beings also tell stories. What would it mean to listen for those stories? Anna Tsing calls this "the art of noticing," and I think there is something to cultivating practices of noticing that extend beyond the human. That is another way in which some of the work in animal studies has shaped ethnographic practice and theory.

**Morgan Keith Stewart (MKS):** *Entanglement is one of the key terms in your book along with relatedness. I wonder if you could just explain those terms in relation to examples of human and animal interrelatedness in India but also other examples that you see in the United States or other parts of the world?*

**RG:** I use the term 'relatedness' to think about the cluster of relationships or entanglements, if you will, that I encountered while doing fieldwork. I use it for several reasons. One, the language of relatedness was everywhere and when I was talking to people especially. They framed their relationships with these animals as a kind of relatedness, not just in the sense of kinship, but in the sense that the outcome of their lives was bound up with the outcome of the lives of these other kinds of animals that they lived alongside. The point I make is that relatedness is not always sought out. It doesn't imply only mutuality and care, it also implies hierarchy, violence, and it's often imposed from above, in multiple ways. I think of cow-protection discourse as one of those kinds of impositions of relatedness, where right-wing cow protectionists will often insist that the cow is *Gau Mata*, the Mother of all Hindus, and that that makes it incumbent for Hindus to protect her on the grounds of this kinship. I argue that this kind of kinship produces violent

effects in the lives of multiple people and animals, but I try to think about how that relatedness is then countered by other enactments and imaginings of relatedness.

But I also argue that there were these kinds of connections of intimacy that people particularly understood as kinship that came from animals. Many of the women would talk about how their goats felt a kind of attachment to them, and they described this very much in the language of children forming attachments. When thinking about kinship and care, there's a tendency to sometimes romanticize care, even though there is a whole body of feminist literature that problematizes care, that thinks about the kinds of labor that go into care, and the ways in which care has come to be gendered within certain kinds of political-economic frameworks in which women's work is simultaneously domesticized and devalued. And you can see a very similar kind of process at play here, where animal work is considered women's work. It's not really valued, in the sense that it's unpaid labor. I argue that foregrounding that kinship with animals sometimes becomes an important way in which women are actually able to claim value for that labor. Labor becomes the grounds upon which those kinds of kin connections are made.

You can see similar kinds of kin relations or relatedness built on these entangled lives in other spaces as well. The history of conservation in India also has its own trajectory, which is different from, say, the United States, just because of the different colonial context. But there is a way one can think through those questions in other spaces as well: conservation in the United States, for example. The pet industry within the US is a multi-billion-dollar industry and is firmly situated within discourses about pets as family. So, I think the language of kinship does really important work there. Thinking about the ways in which pet keeping also emerges within certain kinds of racial and class formations is a question that is open in multiple other contexts, not just India.

**MKS:** *Yeah, I feel like in the United States we cloak the relationships between humans and animals. We openly talk about pets, but in so many other relationships we have, especially if you consider where we get our food from, all of those discourses are obscure. You can just go to the supermarket and the food is there; you don't have to have any sort of experience with the process. What do you think that cloaking these entanglements does to society?*

**RG:** For me, it reminds us that thinking about animals is thinking about questions of labor, about discourses of sanitation and concealment - in this specific case, thinking of factory farming. And there's a great deal of excellent work on the ways in which discourses of concealment operate to make the factory farm this hidden space. Timothy Pachirat, for example, argues that one of the hallmarks of modernity is the concealment of slaughter. There are longer histories of slaughterhouses being moved out onto the fringes of urban areas. We were just talking about the ways in which new sets of laws protect factory farms, its labor, and its conditions, from being made visible. I'm thinking of the laws that prevent animal-rights activists from filming in these farms, for instance.

But it's also about issues of labor. In many of these massive factory farms in the US, you now have an increased racial division of labor where a lot of the workforce is immigrant and often is undocumented. The conditions in these farms are often terrible, and there's punishment for demanding better labor conditions. So, there's a way in which we have to think about what the concealment does - not only for the kind of animal subjects whose lives are being monetized in these spaces, whose deaths are being monetized - but also for the human subjects who are in these places. As I said, it reminds me that animal studies is at its most effective when it folds in those questions of labor, of gender, of class, and of production and capital in these spaces. And I think the concealment that you're talking about is about all of these different parts.

**MKS:** *In chapter five of your book, you talk about the "pig gone wild." I believe it was a British colonial laboratory where they were doing experiments on a pig, and it escaped and supposedly started interbreeding with the local pig population and then creating this new breed of pig. The concept that I wasn't quite sure about was "the other wild." Would you mind explaining that a little further and how that relates to the "pig gone wild"?*

**RG:** The story of the pig gone wild is actually from the post-colonial period. There was this colonial laboratory that was set up in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century in that region, and the idea was that they were working on animal disease. Most local legends had it that there was a pig, a sow who was pregnant, who escaped the confines of her captivity and was never found. Most people believe she disappeared in the jungle, that she had all these piglets and that those piglets became feral in the jungle. And the story was often told in response to questions about how the wild boar population had exploded because there was a massive explosion of the wild boar population.

I talk in the chapter about how there are many reasons why the story makes sense. [For instance], pigs go feral very easily. Even when you're keeping domestic swine, most people there would talk about how difficult it was to control the desire of domestic swine for wildness. There were many reasons why the story makes sense, but what I argue is that the story of the pig provides a different way to think about wildness than the ways in which wildness is passed down to us within certain kinds of colonial discourse.

There are two kinds of discourses of wildness that I talk about in particular. One is the fantasy of wildness as untouched by human contact, the idea that the wild is this kind of sacrosanct space that is set off from human domains. That notion of wildness undergirds much conservation policy in India today and in many other places, the idea that the wild has to be separated from the domain of the human if it is to survive. You see that in the insistence that people cannot exist in the space of national parks, and that's a discourse that continues to bear tremendous resonance in India, even today. But that is fueled by another theory of wildness, which is the idea that the "native" is prone to a certain kind of wildness, and that's another kind of colonial logic that undergirded much of conservation. Conservation laws were necessary to protect wild animals from natives who were driven wild by their lust for meat or their lust for hunting and could not be counted on to preserve animals.

**MKS:** *[You write about] the same thing happening with the monkeys, that the people were not allowed to hunt them because they would supposedly end up just killing everything.*

**RG:** Yeah, and that is a tremendously influential discourse. I mean, of course you can point to the utter hypocrisy of it, when it is actually colonial administrators who are responsible for decimating large numbers of wildlife in the colonial period. The idea that the native hunter is the problem is obviously its own kind of hypocrisy.

**MKS:** *And deaths of natives as well. I don't know too much about the context of India, but certainly in Latin America and the United States, the decimation and destruction of the population occurred there.*

**RG:** Absolutely, and in India and in many of the British colonies what was interesting - and a lot of historians have worked on this - was that hunting becomes terrain for the exercise of colonial power. Deciding who has power over animal life, who gets to access it, is one important space in which colonial power is worked out. So, you see, even within conservation, the workings of colonial dominion deciding who gets to be sovereign over animal life. And that framework of conservation is something that the post-colonial state adopts. And there are ongoing conversations among conservationists in India at this point about how they might try to move past this kind of fortress-model of conservation that's very colonial. But it's a challenge. There is a kind of sanctity to animal life that is very hard to question, and it's interesting: it's almost always when it's a threat to agrarian property that there's any concession towards cultivators. That was also an outcome of the colonial period where you see these massive battles between forest officials and agrarian officials, and agrarian officials saying, "you have to give licenses to shoot because it's threatening revenue."

At this point, I think that within India state conservation remains very colonial, and I think the story of the pig was a way to think about wildness differently. I talk in the chapter about how people when they told the story would talk about how the pig escaped the institution and could never be found. In a way, the pig sort of escapes from this colonial institution, which becomes one way of challenging its power. But they were also thinking about how the history of the pig demonstrated that wildness is contingent, it's historically determined. They would often say, "look, the wildness that the state is protecting is actually something that is born of a domesticated pig." But at the same time, they would talk about how domestic swine were always in this kind of state of wanting to go wild. So, they acknowledge that there was a tension between domesticity and wildness, but the notion of wildness that they were working with allowed for a critique of colonial notions of purity and of wildness. And that's why I called it an "other wild." It opens up the possibility of thinking about wildness otherwise, and I rely heavily on the work of people like Jack Halberstam who talks about whether wildness is always blighted to its kind of colonial origins, or are there other ways in which we might think about wildness?

I argue that the story of the pig also becomes a way for Dalits to critique oppression by upper-caste Hindus, who associate pigs with Dalits and will refuse to touch the flesh of domestic



swine, but will then eat the meat of wild boar with great relish. Several of my Dalit interlocutors pointed to that as an example of upper-caste hypocrisy. In that way, talking about the pig also became a way to mount a critique of caste oppression in really interesting ways. I argue that it is precisely because of its kind of fluidity that the wildness of the pig who went wild opens up the possibility of this other way of thinking of wildness.

**QZ:** *I was fascinated by your last chapter, in which you discussed the bear as an embodiment of queer desire and women's desire. Could you talk a bit about the kind of potential impact of animal studies on gender and women's studies or the direction that gender and women's studies can engage with animal studies?*

**RG:** I think it's no surprise that some of the most influential figures within animal studies and within the kind of more-than-human domain have been feminist scholars, because for a very long time, they have been questioning the naturalness of categories such as sex and species. So, there is - for me, at least - a very powerful connection between animal studies that is also calling into question the naturalness of these boundaries with feminist studies, which has taught us how categories like race, gender, sex, and sexuality are naturalized and have pointed instead to the ways in which they come to be naturalized within certain contexts of power. So, I actually feel the question is: how much has animal studies been shaped by gender, women, and sexuality studies rather than necessarily the other way around. There is a really fertile conversation around questions of intimacy. The work on care, for example, also draws heavily on feminist scholars. Kinship, again, has also been questioned by scholars who have taught about queer kinship: Kath Weston, Sarah Franklin, and all of these other feminist scholars who have questioned how we think about kinship and blood, for example.

**MKS:** *We were talking about how animals become symbols of certain things; there are very likable, lovable animals that end up being central in children's clothing, children's books, etc. I'm wondering about the connection between this kind of symbolic view of animals and the very material, individualized animals that you tease out in your book. If there needs to be some sort of change there, and it seems like there does need to be some change in how we view animals, what might that change look like and how then would that sort of thing also affect other environmental narratives? For example, with the recent fires in Australia, the koala has become the poster child for this whole movement. Do you think of that as an effective use of an animal symbol because it might raise awareness for conservation and the environmental crisis that we're experiencing more and more, or is it problematic to have those sorts of symbols that might have us looking at animals in ways that aren't exactly beneficial to them or to life in general?*

**RG:** As an anthropologist, I am interested in what kinds of politics are activated by animal symbols. To the first part of your question on materiality and symbols, I think that what I find interesting is studying how individual animals and their relationships with individual humans might shake up the ways in which they come to be symbolized. I think about this in my book in relation to cows, particularly in thinking about how individual cows and their relationships with people and people's recognition of the individuality of cows, shapes their relationship to the

symbol of the Cow Mother that's put forth by the Hindu right. So, I think there's a way in which bringing the question of symbolism with the question of materiality can yield really interesting insights.

**MKS:** *So not necessarily privileging one over the other?*

**RG:** Yeah, I think that the symbolic and the material are really caught up in one another. Symbols are also material; the idea that symbols are somehow immaterial is a dangerous one. For me, what becomes much more interesting is thinking about how those come to be embedded in one another and what kinds of contradictions emerge between the symbolic and the material. But also, what kinds of inextricable connections [exist]. So, I tend to think of the two of them together as being really powerful.

To your second question about the use of animals as symbols, I find fascinating what kinds of affect, of empathy are activated when the koala is the face of the bushfire as opposed to, say, a field rat. What publics does that constitute? What allows for those publics to gravitate to the figure of the koala over the figure of the field rat? What are the understandings of empathy that undergird that identification? Who do you feel empathy for? How is that shaped by historical circumstances? These are questions that are interesting to me. I don't think it's natural to feel empathy for the koala over the field rat, so the question that then becomes interesting to me is: how have we been trained to connect with the koala or the kangaroo over these other kinds of beings? And what structures - political, economic, social - have gone into allowing for that identification to happen? So, for me, it's not a question of the good or the bad, but thinking about what kinds of politics are made possible through that? And what kinds of politics are closed off? What are the limits of that empathy? What are the limits of that care? And how might we move beyond the limits of that? And what kind of symbolic work, what kinds of other work would it take to move beyond the limits set by that symbol. So, I know it's not an answer, but it's something to think about.

**MKS:** *No, that definitely helps me to think about the question.*

**QZ:** *So, in talking about these kinds of symbols, I think it is interesting when you mentioned how affect is structured by many factors - such as social, economic, and political. I was wondering, if I want to approach this kind of analysis, what kind of aspects can I look at? For example, can I look at the discursive discussion of the symbol? And what errors are critical in this kind of analysis?*

**RG:** For me, it becomes a question of thinking historically about what kinds of institutions, social actors, and broader conditions are involved in the structuration of affect. One challenge is that affect is often read as sort of instinctive and natural and emotion is read as more structured, which is not, I think, what most theories of affect are doing. Thinking about the structuration of affect [is important]: how bodies come to intersect, how you experience your body. These are older questions within feminist studies: questioning even the naturalness of the body, how the

body becomes constructed. So, for me it's really about extending those kinds of conversations about what is the social field that you are laying out. Then it becomes a question of thinking much more empirically about what kinds of affective connections you're tracing. So, for me, then the question becomes more specific to a particular topic.

**QZ:** *Yes, exactly, I'm thinking about the construction of the panda as a national symbol for China, so there is certainly some history during which the panda was constructed in a certain way for all of their political, economic, and cultural factors.*

**RG:** Yeah, so thinking about that history is really important, that specific history.

**QZ:** *Thank you very much.*

**MKS:** *We're about out of time. Do you have any last comments, a takeaway for us? One thing that you wish someone would take away from your work?*

**RG:** I thank you so much for such a close engagement and for these questions. It has really been a pleasure talking to you guys. I feel like the questions were really insightful and got a conversation going, so thank you.

**QZ:** *Thank you.*

**MKS:** *Thank you.*