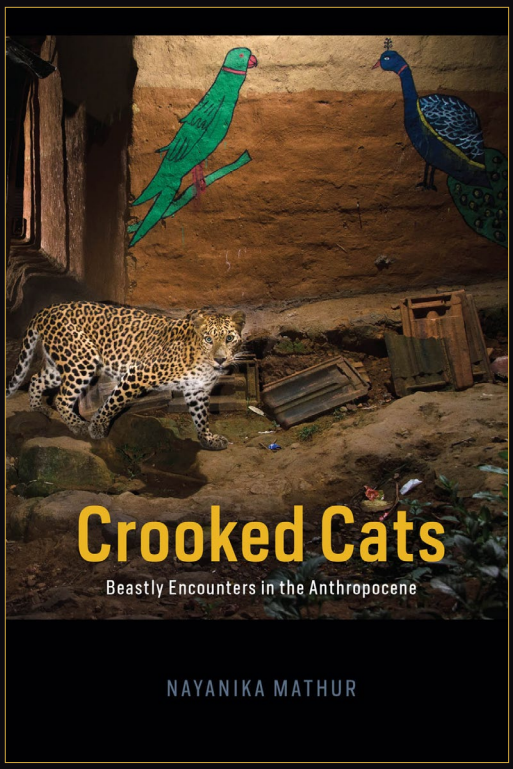
BOOK REVIEW

Beastly Tales for the Anthropocene

Paloma Bhattacharjee



Review of:
Nayanika Mathur, *Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene*. Animal Lives. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. xiv + 208 pp., 16 halftones. $27.50 (pb).

Paloma Bhattacharjee is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada.

Email: pba41@sfu.ca

Contemporary anthropological scholarship on more-than-human relationships has brought to our attention the complex social relations and communicative possibilities shared across life forms that inhabit degrading landscapes. Recent works such as Radhika Govindarajan's *Animal Intimacies* (2018), Michael. R. Dove's *Bitter Shade* (2021) and Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013) have offered crucial insights into how different human communities interpret nonhuman agencies, be it through focusing on their points of view, practical skills, political presence, or on the influence that their worldmaking activities have on social relations. Nayanika Mathur's *Crooked Cats* is an important addition to this rich corpus of literature. Over fifteen years in the making, *Crooked Cats* is an ethnographic inquiry into the connections between the rise in unusual encounters between humans and big cats in India and the unprecedented ecological changes that mark the Anthropocene. By no means an account of mechanical correlation or cause-and-effect, *Crooked Cats* argues instead that indeterminacy is central to the relationship between interspecies relations and ecological crises.

By listening to the explanations provided by those people who live in close proximity with big cats, Mathur argues that indeterminacies unfold within complex socio-political contexts. She suggests that her interlocutors' explanations or theorizations are ultimately premised on a recognition that humans are not the only actors—that big cats can become "crooked" (3). "Crookedness" here refers to the uncharacteristic or aberrant behaviour of big cats, like the leopards who are perceived to be intentionally preying on humans. The recurring question among Mathur's interlocutors—"what makes a big cat crooked?" (3)—situates the actions and temperament of the big cats within their politico-ecological context.

Crooked Cats is based on fieldwork conducted in the Indian states of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Maharashtra. But Mathur's arguments also transcend these particular locations. Crucial to the book is a movement across the scales of the intimate and the planetary. Intimate, because the work is centred on the stories, or "Beastly

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Tales", told among people who live in close quarters with big cats. Planetary, because Mathur contends that these stories offer an opportunity for us to grasp some of the complexities of the Anthropocene; these beastly tales articulate how lived experience unfolds within the context of specific histories, power relationships, local politics, and cosmological understandings. As a form of knowledge, Mathur says, such stories respond to the uncertainty of the present times. And "uncertainty" is a conceptual tool with which Mathur urges the reader to question the promise of certitude that distinguishes scientific ways of knowing in modernity. The present ecological crises repeatedly trouble the limits of certainty, she says.

Indeed, the book's opening chapters show how scientific and bureaucratic claims about why big cats become crooked actually derive from numerous provisional, tacit, and intuitive knowledges. In the first chapter, for example, Mathur argues that the official or scientific explanations for crookedness have generally sat in opposition to what gets construed as local, indigenous or native explanations. Mathur dismantles this opposition between local and official by pointing out their co-production.

The argument is developed further in the second chapter. There, she discusses the events following the unwelcome presence of maneater cats in human-populated areas. What becomes most pressing in these circumstances is the identification of the maneater cats. The author explores the conflict between the bureaucratic insistence on identifying guilty cats (before taking action) and the difficulty of such identifications. She demonstrates that people who are tasked with executing the official protocol of ID-ing maneater cats tend to rely on affective registers to determine whether the cats are maneaters or innocents. These forms of recognition embrace inexplicability as their premise and are shared among people who, through their histories of living close to big cats, have developed skills of interpreting the cats through registers such as their gaze and gait.

Mathur develops her argument further through her discussion of celebrity big cats. The third chapter presents an account of the public conversations generated by a white tiger from Delhi Zoo, named

Vijay, who mauled to death a zoo visitor who entered his enclosure. Through the example of this popular tiger who turned from cute to maneater, Mathur traces the commodification of animal personalities and the sentimentality they invoke, pointing to the fact that market-driven emotional responses tend to get invested in the dichotomy of cuteness and animality.

The fourth chapter examines the issue of governance by exploring petitions against dangerous cats which are sent to both government offices as well as holy shrines and temples. Here Mathur analyses these petitions as an important genre of narrative in themselves, revealing in her close readings how these documents couple the sacred with the profane, the bureaucratic with the affective. Moreover, Mathur contends that big cats often appear in these petition-narratives as having more agentic capacities than the humans who wrote them, who present themselves as "subjugated" (92) or vulnerable to the prowess of predators.

The sixth chapter explores how humans and nonhumans share space and "live beside" (124) one another within densely populated urban areas across cities in India. Scholars such as Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose have argued against the idea of a sequestered nature that exists separately from civilization, and have instead foregrounded the extent to which nonhuman beings actively engage in place-making activities in spaces that are misconceived as only human habitats. Mathur adds to these critical conversations on the multispecies city by explaining how people's interpretations of the presence and movement of big cats is mediated by the spatial histories and hierarchies of these places—be it ghettoization based on class, caste, political turmoil between the hills and plains, or the conflict between indigenous communities and migrant settlers.

Towards the end of the book Mathur addresses the range of intense emotions and forms of communication and intimacy that are produced through encounters with nonhuman animals. She examines in particular how new kinds of visual technologies—CCTV, smartphones, and camera traps—allow for new ways of visualizing nonhuman lives that are distinct from the earlier images of hunting or

professional wildlife photography. Mathur argues that these visual technologies mark a new mode of knowing animals, "entrapping" them in a visual regime of surveillance in which "unusual" behaviours are starkly marked out (31).

Crooked Cats is a timely contribution that speaks to the growing need for more situated accounts of climate change, which it offers by attending to the "logics and poetics" (4) of beastly tales in their bureaucratic and narrative forms. Mathur makes a strong case that beastly tales dissolve many dichotomies — religious–political, cosmological–historical, science–myth — which separate the clear interconnections that constitute living in the Anthropocene. Her work makes a refreshing addition to the burgeoning body of scholarship on interspecies relationships. The work is a fascinating read for those concerned about the Anthropocene, governance, nonhuman lives, extinction and knowledge formation.