Disorderly Theory

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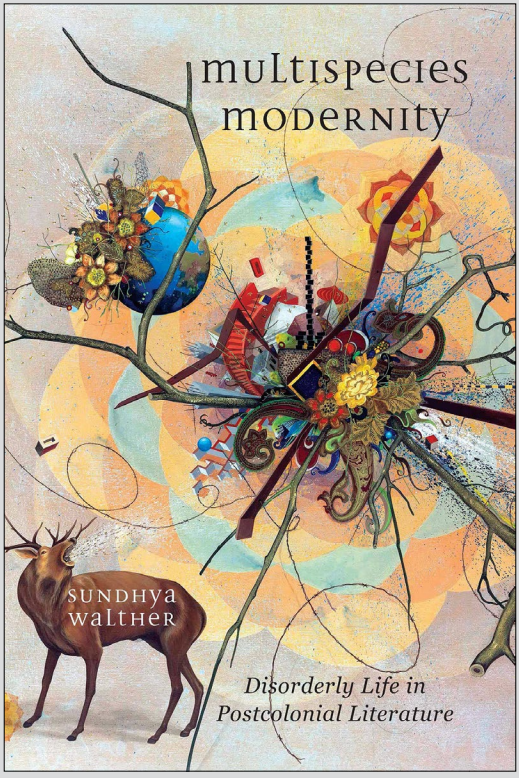

Review of:
Sundhya Walther, *Multispecies Modernity: Disorderly Life in Postcolonial Literature*. Environmental Humanities. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2021. x + 270 pp. CA$85.00 (hb).

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In the two decades since Philip Armstrong urged postcolonial and animal studies scholars to find common ground against "that notion of the human that centers upon a rational individual self or ego",[1] a small but robust body of theory and literary criticism has demonstrated how we cannot analyse colonial history without taking interspecies entanglements into account. A welcome contribution to postcolonial animal studies, Sundhya Walther's *Multispecies Modernity: Disorderly Life in Postcolonial Literature* explores animals in Indian fiction, journalism, film, and autobiography across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Over five chapters, the book argues that human–animal encounters in Indian literary and cultural texts can signal "disorderly" forms of multispecies living that challenge "orderly" narratives of Indian modernity and nationhood (12). While Walther draws on myriad theoretical approaches following the animal turn in humanities scholarship (in both postcolonial criticism and beyond), her core argument concerns how animals can be understood as subalterns: marginalized populations excluded from political power in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Using examples from literature and the visual arts, Walther posits that interspecies subalternity suggests alliances between people and animals that disrupt concepts of modernity inherited from Enlightenment thought. The book demonstrates evidence of expansive research, and Walther's theorization of interspecies alliances is intriguing. However, more could have been done to demonstrate how the book's call for "alliances" between species follows from the subaltern condition, as there are moments here when the argument seems to take for granted one's "otherness to the sovereign human" as sufficient grounds for interspecies solidarity. Additionally, the analysis feels disjointed at times, as Walther draws on an expansive range of theorists and methodologies to make broad claims about ideology and the postcolonial state that sometimes seem misaligned with a given chapter's literary examples.

Expanding on classic texts by Gayatri Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty, the introductory chapter theorizes the subaltern as a multispecies

1 Philip Armstrong, "The Postcolonial Animal", *Society and Animals* 10, no. 4 (2002): 413–19.

Humanimalia 14, no. 1 (2023): 419–428. DOI: 10.52537/humanimalia.15839

construct. Walther focuses first on Spivak's "epistemic fracture", the way subaltern representation by a society's elites repeatedly stages that representation's failure, rendering human subalterns and mainstream society unknowable to one another. Extending Spivak's formulation to the mutual incomprehension between animals and humans (16), Walther posits that the "other side of difference" — the unbridgeable gulf between mainstream society and the subaltern — might also include other unknowable beings like non-human animals (15). Anticipating pushback from postcolonial scholars allergic to human–animal comparisons, Walther emphasizes that she does not want to draw parallels between subaltern species. Rather, she reads "the other side of difference" as a phrase that positions animals and subaltern humans as distinct groups that share the experience of exclusion from mainstream Indian society.

Walther then turns to Dipesh Chakrabarty's programmatic theorization of "subaltern histories" to compensate for Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak (Chakrabarty devised multiple orders of history, or what Walther calls "Narrative 2s", to account for unofficial narratives that can trouble official history or "Narrative 1s" — again, Walther's term). Arguably, Chakrabarty reproduces subaltern silence, as Spivak's critique rests on the premise that the inclusion of the disenfranchised into mainstream discourse in any context (university curricula, the professional sphere, or mainstream publishing, for instance) will always exclude some people at the bottom. By this logic, Chakrabarty's "subaltern" history is a misnomer, as hegemonic discourse would ultimately absorb Narrative 2s into a hierarchical structure predicated on the ongoing exclusion of oppressed histories beyond a given Narrative 2's ambit.

Walther's workaround for subaltern exclusion is not entirely clear, and at this juncture the overall argument for alliances and interspecies subalternity also starts to feel underdeveloped. She suggests that "*alliances* between History or Narrative 2s" can enable us to locate "forms of subaltern speaking that, though they require our attention, do not necessarily need to be entirely accessible to History or Narrative 1s to be effective as ways of speaking" (18, emphasis in

original). In other words, subaltern speech can be understood as something we infer but can never know. Alliances, in turn, suggest a form of multispecies subaltern "speech" that rumbles beneath mainstream history. While Walther reframes Chakrabarty's Narrative 2 from a knowable historical category to an awareness of our epistemological limits, she leaves unanswered how or why precarity between species implies affinities between them. Granted, interspecies alliances can complicate the glut of scholarship on interspecies conflict in the postcolony. Yet Walther's justification for interspecies alliances seems circular insofar as she takes marginalization as its premise. That is, it seems reasonable to conclude that clashes between precarious people and animals come about from competition for limited resources. If this is the case, then human–animal alliances would have to preempt, or at the very least account for, the scarcity problem. Walther, however, does not explore this conundrum.

Additionally, Walther's call for interspecies alliances does not clearly address how the subaltern speech problem might apply to animals. Spivak argues that subaltern humans do, in fact, speak—the issue at stake is that subaltern speech is unintelligible to non-subalterns because we relegate the subaltern to a state of abjection that dwells in an ontological void. In other words, it is not that subalterns cannot speak so much as we choose not to hear them—the subaltern always and already represents an excluded social and philosophical excess, the negative category against which we circumscribe the structures we inhabit. To make a claim about animal subalterns, Walther would have to first justify why we would map the problem of human subaltern speech upon beings who literally do not speak. Even if we imagined a speaking animal, the category of "animal subaltern" would oblige us to assume that we do not understand the speaking animal on the same terms that we do not understand the speaking human subaltern (this is not to deny that humans oppress animals—rather, the terms upon which we oppress them are not necessarily reducible to how we oppress other humans). Walther states that she is not conflating humans and animals when she evokes Spivak's epistemic fracture (15–16), but the epistemic fracture

does not strike me as a limit point of understanding through which we can assume multiple expressions of incommensurability; rather, it seems to suggest the condition upon which the human subaltern speaks and is not understood.

While Walther could have done more to demonstrate how interspecies subalternity lends itself to alliances between marginalized people and animals, the remainder of the introduction admirably troubles animal representation in visual art and literature. To some degree, Walther reminds us, we cannot escape our assumptions about animals. To connect with other creatures, we must assimilate what we believe to be their lived experiences into human sensibilities, all while remaining mindful of how the assumptions that undergird our beliefs about an animal's perspective preclude our ability to know the animal at all. Only then might we consider different animal representations in the literary and cultural texts under analysis. While some writers want to know what the animal feels, finds Walther, others use the figure of the animal as a device to defamiliarize human experience. Walther concludes that the point is about neither knowing nor using animals, but about how Indian writing and visual art can disrupt popular assumptions about animals and people in Indian modernity.

The first chapter interrogates mainstream conservation discourses, reading Jim Corbett's 1944 collection of hunting tales, *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, against Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Walther finds that conservation biologists during the colonial and post-Independence eras have managed ecological space by dividing people, animals, and plants into discrete zones determined by commercial interests (33–34). She then explores how Corbett and Ghosh's texts feature conservationists who violate the boundaries that divide these zones. For Walther, the conservationist's privileged status between civilization and the wilderness represents an ideological excess, or exception to the rules of conservation that, paradoxically, holds those rules in place. Walther is a wonderful close reader, and her analysis of Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, in particular, is excellent. Focusing on how Corbett frames the tiger

as both an object of desire and an autobiographical tool, Walther considers how the text leaves undecidable colonial power's "attachment to boundaries and the compulsion to transgress those boundaries, between orderly division and disorderly encounter" (39). The tiger in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, meanwhile, operates as a ghost of sorts. Here, Walther advances a double critique. She argues that Ghosh's tiger, at the text's manifest level, signals Western conservation's failure to segregate species spatially and conceptually. Yet the tiger's ineffability also escapes the novel's explicit valorization of "subaltern spirituality" as an antidote to conservation (60). Walther then considers how the novel's narrative structure duplicates conservation's spatial and conceptual boundaries even as its content challenges how conservationists organize people, animals, and environments.

Walther's second chapter uses Mohandas K. Gandhi's *An Autobiography: My Experiments with Truth* and Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* to explore questions of eating animals and Indian nationalism across three big historical moments: the 1857 Rebellion, Independence struggles by elite Hindus during the 1930 and 1940s, and the contemporary Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) embrace of religious orthodoxy. Bucking scholarship that downplays Gandhi's preoccupations with diet, Walther demonstrates how *My Experiments with Truth* grounds the abstract political principle of *ahimsa* (which roughly translates to non-violence) in the vegetarian body. While Gandhian *ahimsa* ostensibly proposes a radically egalitarian politics, Walther contends that the conservative BJP has used *ahimsa* and vegetarianism to exclude Indian Muslims from the contemporary national imaginary. She then turns to Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, which focuses on the 1857 Rebellion, to demonstrate how popular perceptions of Indian nationalism have long relied on the exclusion of Muslims. While the chapter provides good insights into how some conservative Hindu movements have used vegetarianism and non-violence to exclude Muslims, it feels incomplete without a discussion of caste or Gandhi's fraught relationship with Dalits (erstwhile "untouchables" excluded from India's fourfold caste hierarchy). Indeed, Dalit writers

and activists have long deployed art and literature to contest Gandhian *ahimsa* and caste Hinduism's vegetarian ethic. Engagement with texts about cattle slaughter and meat eating — such as Omprakash Valmiki's "The Killing of a Cow"; Amitabh's "The Cull"; or Chandramohan Sathyanathan's "Beef Poem" — would have both substantiated the book's interest in subaltern life and challenged recent scholarship that rushes to celebrate Gandhi while turning a blind eye to the controversies that surrounded him.

Chapter three pivots to companionate relationships, offering a fresh perspective on postcolonial criticism's longstanding concerns with "home" and "nation". Analysing domestic space in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* and R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Walther considers how these texts complicate elite Partition-era narratives of nationhood. While both novels explore interpersonal relationships through material and conceptual partitions, Walther suggests that animals' indifference to human boundaries complicate existing scholarship on *Clear Light of Day* which has, thus far, largely limited itself to human interactions. Chakrabarty's subaltern history frames Walther's reading of Desai, which investigates how domestic space in the novel represents both exclusion and sanctuary from the public realm. Whereas animals, women, and the disabled have been excluded from elite Independence narratives, the house in *Clear Light of Day* signals a counter-discursive space that enables free movement and engagement between people and animals. Walther extends her considerations of counternarratives, nationalism, and animals in Desai's text to taxidermy in Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi.* Here, Walther considers how Narayan turns "the nation" into a taxidermized object. If taxidermy, like text, repeatedly fails to contain the thing it claims to represent (by virtue of the fact that the representation of a thing is not the thing-in-itself), Walther asks how "nationhood", as a representation of a people, similarly escapes narrative containment. The connection here feels somewhat forced, however, as Walther does not demonstrate how the difference between representation and object, in the contexts of taxidermy and text, scale up to a critique of nationhood-as-representation in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

While nationalized industries and big government defined post-Partition India under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the late twentieth century witnessed the country's transition to global capital. The contemporary Indian city became a global metropolis, and in chapter four Walther highlights urban interspecies encounters in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and a series of headline-making leopard attacks in Mumbai. Aligning herself with more-than-human geographers who advocate for urban spaces that accommodate all types of creatures (not just humans and companion species), Walther complicates Sue Donaldson and Wil Kymlicka's formulation of the animal denizen, urban creatures who are not quite domesticated nor wild (171). Whereas Donaldson and Kymlicka define denizens as precarious "outsiders" who inhabit urban spaces (migrant workers, for example, or urban wildlife like foxes or raccoons in the case of non-humans), Walther argues that literary works can imagine forms of interspecies "ungovernability" that complicate the denizen's liminal status (172). The chapter attends, first, to animal metaphors in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. While the literary analysis is cogent, it feels disconnected from the chapter's argument about ungovernability, the metropolis, wildlife, and denizens: Walther emphasizes instead how the novel hints at multispecies alliances when its protagonist, Balram, encounters the eponymous tiger at a zoo, only to undermine such a possibility after Balram uses his transformative encounter with the tiger to murder his employer and launch his own startup. The chapter then turns to Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai. Analysing newspaper accounts about leopards who attacked an informal settlement at the park's boundaries, Walther considers how Indian media excludes wild animals and the urban poor from contemporary ideas about Mumbai as a world-class city. Walther argues that if urban developers, journalists and the middle class are serious about the democratic values that undergird modernity, then they must help dismantle the social and interspecies hierarchies that marginalize Mumbai's animals and the poor.

In between these chapters are three "provocations", short discussions of Indian visual artists Sakshi Gupta, Sujatro Ghosh, and Jagannath Pand. Presenting elephant sculptures made from scrap

materials, photographs of women wearing cow masks, and collages with hyenas and pigeons in urban spaces, Walther states that these intermezzos "are not intended as fully realized analyses; rather, they set up little spaces for reflection that keep open the questions of the previous chapter while unfolding toward the ideas of the next" (27–28). While enjoyable and engaging, more could have been done to demonstrate how each provocation expands upon and segues into the chapters surrounding it.

Finally, in a short postscript, Walther cites a 2014 incident in which a man entered a tiger enclosure at the National Zoological Park in Delhi. The media used grisly videos from onlookers to sensationalize the encounter. Walther suggests that the media narrative absolved the zoo of any culpability, imposing sole responsibility upon the man for alcoholism or mental illness. To provide an alternative reading of the incident, Walther cites John Berger's critique of the way zoos transform animals into "simulacra of themselves" (212). She asks how the man's actions might be read as a violation of spatial and conceptual boundaries that are, themselves, predicated on the violent appropriation of animal lives for human consumption. Walther then considers whether literary representations of animals recreate the zoo's logic. She concludes that any interpretation of nonhuman animals appropriates the animal, yet that appropriation can also urge us to imagine more equitable (or less inequitable) forms of interspecies communion.

While it could have delved deeper into subaltern alliances, *Multispecies Modernity* ably synthesizes critical animal studies with postcolonial criticism to provide fresh and provocative close readings of human–animal encounters in Indian literature. The book could have moved beyond texts by middle-class and elite authors to ground the animal subaltern in literature by and about the subcontinent's marginalized groups. Indeed, greater engagement with historically excluded communities such as Adivasis and Dalits would have strengthened Walther's claims about interspecies subalternity. The book also tends to focus on charismatic animals like tigers, dolphins, and cows. More texts that feature insects, fish, or

strays—which have not received as much critical attention in postcolonial animal studies—could have generated reflection on how and why we value some animals more than others (the chapter on Desai and Narayan, which features lizards, birds, and a housecat, starts moving toward a more complex understanding of how we think about quotidian creatures). All told, however, *Multispecies Modernity* makes a valuable and learned contribution to postcolonial animal studies.