Transitional Animals

These three very different talks will all invite us to think differently about texts and histories; about academic and cultural practices; and about humans and animals.

Join us on zoom on Thursday 11 May 2023 4.00-5.30

**Shonaleeka Kaul (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)**

**Animals, Affect and Ethics in Early India: Rethinking the *Panchatantra-Hitopadesha* Tradition**

This paper explores anew the representation of animals in a seminal, dedicated textual tradition in the Sanskrit language, best identified with the iconic 5th century *Panchatantra* that travelled around the world, and its retelling, the 9th century *Hitopadesha*.  These epigrammatic texts, peopled by a large number of human and non-human animals, belonged to a major premodern genre of thought known as *niti,*which was the knowledge and art of prudent conduct. This paper delves into this tradition to illuminate for the first time the mutually constituted fields of animal history and Sanskrit literary production in all their cultural specificities. In particular, it argues for the instrumentality of animals in political, aesthetic and ethical culture and discourse in India.

In the process, this paper also re-examines crucial methodological questions in animal studies, such as the agency of animals, their personhood, as well as the problematic of representation. Reclaiming anthropomorphism in Sanskrit texts from the thrall of anthropocentric readings so far, I show how we can develop an enabling understanding of the former to yield semantically rich, non-western imaginaries of non-human animals as well as new categories for their study.

**Dr Kelsey Granger (Ludwig-Maximilian University)**

**China in Pet Studies and Pet Studies in China**

Much like in Western contexts, the keeping of pet animals in China predates the ‘modern’ era, even if it is a more visible and lucrative practice in today’s society. However, when studying pet-keeping practices in China’s past, an appropriate framework has yet to be founded. This presentation contrasts three categories of research on Chinese lapdogs (most often equating to the Pekingese specifically) to evidence the fault-lines that have been needlessly drawn in the study of Chinese pet-keeping practices. First are works by amateur dog-fanciers who laid the foundation for later Western works on Chinese lapdogs. Second are works by animal studies specialists who do not work primarily on China. Third are articles by Sinologists, mostly Chinese scholars, who have conducted their research without any critical pet studies interventions. By comparing these findings with an approach combining critical pet studies and Sinology, this presentation aims to highlight the continuing need to adapt animal studies frameworks to non-Western societies and, most of all, to truly incorporate China into pet studies.

**Angela Bartram (University of Derby) and Lee Deigaard (independent scholar)**

**Animals in the creative process: embracing interspecies collaboration and learning from others within creativity**

All animals can be creative. However, examples of non-human and ‘living’ and present animals in art tend to ignore this potential in favour of their use as breathing visual material. Performance art, and the use of non-humans within the gallery, demonstrate this preference. In recent years, though, some artists have sensitized and sensitive means to understand differing perspectives of what it is to be a creative animal. Bartram (UK) and Deigaard (USA) are two artists who collaborate from, and with animal. Using diverse methods, and curious to a myriad of opening potentialities, they explore working as humans from an animal-centric perspective. They bring sensitivities to their handling of the animal as both artistic subject and collaborator, in order to observe and engage with empathy and openness to the unexpected, to animal insight and revelation.

This paper explores the socialized and familiar in close observation in their individual yet companion practices. It reflects on the allowing and embracing of other species within their artworks, and of being mindful and sensible as the humans within an often unbalanced system of agency, and to offer an ethical and practical way forward.

Critical Histories

These two very different talks will all invite us to think differently about the ways we construct and use the work of previous centuries, and how current theoretical and ethical debates can be thought differently through the past..

Join us on zoom on Wednesday 17 May 4.00-5.30

**Taylin Nelson (Rice University)**

**Reaching Forward / Looking Back: 18th-Century Animal Studies and its Stakes for the Future**

This paper asserts that eighteenth-century studies is an especially rich place for scholars to address the future of Critical Animal Studies. It is well-known that the eighteenth-century was a time of philosophers collectively inquiring into the structure of human and nonhuman life, its defining characteristics, and its hierarchies. The Enlightenment project existed in contradiction with itself by both opening the way for imaginative, new perspectives on the nonhuman while at the same time, land, natural materials, animals, and human lives came to be thought of in terms of property. While the literature of the period magnified the point of view of nonhumans, the burgeoning “science”—like natural histories—began to magnify the human point of view onto the nonhuman. It is the task of CAS scholars to consider planetary future inevitabilities, like mass animal extinction, and how we as critical thinkers can address futurity through not just despairing but hopeful methods. Scholars must return to eighteenth-century studies to embody the imaginative perspectives of its literature and to learn from the mistakes and legacies of the Enlightenment. As a field, we have a collective imperative to help pave the way for humanity to think about a future world in which we are all “planetary subjects,” as Gayatri Spivak writes.

**Diana Leca (University of Cambridge)**

**Darwin’s Frogs: On Listening to Little Animals**

When Darwin heard a singing frog during his first year on the Beagle, he mistook it for another species entirely:

The fields resound with the noise which this little animal, as it sits on a blade of grass about an inch from the water, emits.— The note is very musical. I at first thought it must be a bird.— (*Zoology Notes*)

In various texts, including *The Descent of Man* (1871), he praises the ‘musical powers’ of frogs. Following Darwin’s lead here, I set aside birds to explore a less obvious (though surprisingly abundant!) trope for lyric voice: frog song. The paper will touch on both the vocalising and listening apparatuses of amphibians—tree frogs (Hylidae) and the American bullfrog (Lithobates catesbeianus), in particular. This zoological foray will be supplemented by the appearance of frogs in a variety of very short poetic texts, including Yusef Komunyakaa’s chapbook *Night Animals* (2020) and N. H. Pritchard’s ‘FR/OG’ (1971).

Although the environmental humanities is taking greater note of amphibians (and their precipitous decline), my paper argues that the smallness, ordinariness, oddness, and lack of cultural prestige of this class of animal still leaves it largely under-theorised and overlooked within literary studies. In examining the value of Darwin’s ‘little animal’ for prosody, I hope to make a broader claim about the significance of the ecologically minute for the future of the field.

Biographies

Angela Bartram is an artist and artistic researcher working with objects, sound, video, print, performance event and published text, concerning thresholds of the human body, gallery or museum, definitions of the human and animal as companion species and appropriate strategies for documenting the ephemeral. She is Professor of Contemporary Art and Head of Arts Research and the Digital and Material Artistic Research Centre at the University of Derby, is a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Utah State University, and has a PhD from Middlesex University. Lee Deigaard is an artist and writer whose work responds to spontaneous voluntary interactions with generous, curious animal collaborators. She works in a variety of media exploring multi-species empathy, animal cognition and personality, sensory processes of memory and grief, and the nature of intimacy. She has shown and presented her work nationally and internationally in numerous solo and group shows. She is a poet, writer, bookmaker, and curator, and was recently Distinguished Visiting Professor at Utah State University*.*

Kelsey Granger is a Henriette Herz Scholar and Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow affiliated with Ludwig-Maximilian University, Munich. In this role, she is researching the social significance of horses in early and early medieval China, building on her overarching research interest in the social history of animal-keeping in medieval China. Her doctoral project, completed at the University of Cambridge in 2022, centred on the phenomenon of lapdog-keeping among Tang and Song elites as well as the practice’s remarkable Silk Road connections. Related canine research has been published in the Bulletin of SOAS and is forthcoming with the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. Her other key interest, atypical woman in medieval China, has involved the study of Wu Zetian’s male favourites, as published with the late N. Harry Rothschild in the American Review of China Studies, and medieval female avenger tales, as published with the Journal of the American Oriental Society.

Shonaleeka Kaul is a cultural and intellectual historian of early India, specializing in working with Sanskrit literature. She is Associate Professor at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and has also been the Malathy Singh Distinguished Lecturer in South Asian Studies at Yale University, USA, the Jan Gonda Fellow in Indology at Leiden University, The Netherlands, and the DAAD Professor of History at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, Germany. She has authored *The Making of Early Kashmir: Landscape and Identity in the Rajatarangini* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and *Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in Early India*(Permanent Black and University of Chicago Press, 2010). She has also edited *Retelling Time: Alternative Temporalities from Premodern South Asia* (Routledge, 2021), *Eloquent Spaces: Meaning and Community in Early Indian Architecture* (Routledge, 2019) and *Cultural History of Early South Asia: A Reader* (Orient BlackSwan, 2014). Translations by her include *Looking Within: Life Lessons from Lal Ded, the Kashmiri Shaiva Mystic* (Aleph, 2019) and *Hitopadesha* (Aleph, 2022).

Dr Diana Leca is a Marie Curie Global Fellow at the University of Cambridge. She works primarily on twentieth-century environmental writing, with a special focus on minimalist literature and short verse forms. Her broader research interests include American literature, animal studies, environmental poetics, and sound studies (including bioacoustics and various ways of listening). She is working on a book titled American Short Verse and Micro-Ecologies, 1860 to the Present.

Taylin Nelson is a doctoral student at Rice University (under Drs. Betty Joseph & Tim Morton) working on sharks and the slave ship ecology found in eighteenth-century natural histories. She completed an MA at King’s College London in Eighteenth-Century Studies (under Dr. Christine Kenyon-Jones) and BA at Arizona State University (under Dr. Ron Broglio). She currently works as copy editor at SEL, Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 and publishes with BSECS “Criticks.” You can find her forthcoming publication in Routledge Studies in Eighteenth-Century Cultures and Societies Series titled “Labouring Bodies: Work Animals and Hack Writers in Oliver Goldsmith’s Letters.”