

Sugata Ray, Berkeley Book Chats, November 20, 2019

Timothy Hampton: Welcome to Berkeley Book Chats. I'm Timothy Hampton, director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

Berkeley Book Chats showcase a Berkeley faculty member engaged in a public conversation about a recently completed work. This popular series highlights the richness of Berkeley's academic community.

Today's conversation features Sugata Ray of the History of Art Department, discussing his book, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550 to 1850*. He is joined by Whitney Davis, also of the History of Art Department.

Whitney Davis: Sugata and I have a quick plan. I'm going to make a very brief introduction to the book. Sugata will make a more extended comment on the book. If you've read it, you will be glad for the review. If you haven't read it, you'll get some perspective on it. Then I've got some questions and thoughts to pitch at him and then we'll turn over to the audience.

Whitney Davis: First, a disclaimer. I am not a South Asianist. I have no qualifications whatsoever to speak about the substance of Sugata's book. My engagement with it is as someone with a very long-term interest in the intersections between the analysis of climate variability and change, and the history of art. My own interest being in the big ice age of the Pleistocene, the aridification of the Sahara in North Africa and the rise of riverine civilizations in the Near East and Ancient Egypt as a consequence of long-term climatic variability and climate shift.

Whitney Davis: So, let me read a paragraph from Sugata's book, which will get us going. It's from the introduction in which he says quite succinctly what he's all about, what the book's all about. "Crucially for us it was during a period of catastrophic climatic upheavals. The devotees of Krishna traveled to Braj to discover the sites associated with the Hindu God's life on Earth. In time, an extraordinary place-oriented theology emerged. One that not only centralized the veneration of the natural environment, but also perceived each stone, water body and tree in the pilgrimage center as sacred and effervescent with imminent energy. Drawing on this sacramental theology, a rich visual culture that triangulated effective aesthetics, political governance and natural resource management also emerged in the region. This visual culture, which found concrete articulation only after the commencement of a climatic epoch that led to catastrophic droughts in North India beginning in the 1550s is the subject of this book." Thank you. Sugata, please.

Sugata Ray: Thank you, Whitney. Also, thanks to Townsend Center for having us here. I finished the book here two years back, so it's great to be back, and I'm very grateful to the Townsend Center for providing a space to think interdisciplinary, to think about how to write, and giving us the time and space to write, so, thank you.

Sugata Ray: What I have been assigned by Whitney is to talk broadly about what this new thing that everyone is talking about, eco-art history, what that is, and then try to draw it in my own book which talks about climate change. So, as an art historian, I work with images. In 2011, The Daily Beast artist, Asim Waqif, presented an installation titled "Help: Jumna's Protest". Waqif placed the word "help", which

he had fashioned out of plastic bottles and LED light in the river Jumna. The installation, as it is visible in Waqif's prints, appears to suggest against the grain of reason, that the river can think for itself and is capable of expressing in English extreme distress or its own polluted plight.

Sugata Ray: Waqif, of course, is not the only contemporary artist to engage with the fluid nature of the limits and boundaries of what constitutes the object of environmental discourse. As we face catastrophic climate change and large scale environmental devastation globally, artists across the world are exploring how art practice, political ecologies and environmental activism can challenge the anthropocentrism of human sovereignty of the environment. On the screen, we have a still from a film by a London-based art collective, The Otolith Group on geological time and the seismic history of California. This political film focuses on how tectonic forces express themselves in the landscape from the fault line de-bill to appearance above ground such as hairline fractures in cause concrete on the highways that really stands in for California, or 20th century California.

Sugata Ray: Eco-art], as it is now provisionally called, then offers a new possibility of being in the world, of seeing humans and the natural environment, as inextricably intertwined or even endowing non-human objects, forces and life forms with agentive power. Artistic engagement with and response to the natural environment is however hardly a new phenomenon. In his vivid description of the marvel-clad interiors of Justinian's sixth century church of Hagia Sophia, in Constantinople, the poet Paul the Silentiary describes the wall as a landscape of marble meadows highlighting the distant origins and visual effect of the material.

Sugata Ray: In fact, the poet produces an ecological vision of the church, one that attached meaning to the flow of raw material, trade routes, labor, across a wide and diverse terrain. In the early modern period, the period that I work on, emperors and merchants in Florence or in Delhi establish gardens as a form of managing and mastering the natural environment. Such attempts to both visualize and establish large scale gardens was, scholars have suggested, an imposing technique aimed at controlling the natural environment by reordering it.

Sugata Ray: To stop at this mapping of power and authority, to stop by charting a history of human intervention in managing, ordering, aestheticizing, reifying, defying or transforming the natural environment, however, would mean stopping just short of a methodological move provisionally described as eco-art history. My book proposes that eco-art history offers a methodological shift in art history, one that is receptive to the agent of force of the earth in relation t human action on it.

Sugata Ray: As a discipline, art history, like most other forms of historical practices states objects, structures, visual representations produced by the human species as its principle archive and locus of analysis. Consequently, artists, patrons, audiences emerge as the primary agent in this history. It's only in the 2000s that the pressure of post-colonial eco philosophy and new materialism profoundly transformed the disciplinary horizons of art history, and here I'm referring to the work of Deepak Chakraborty or Jane Bennett among others.

Sugata Ray: This new turn was symptomatic of the intellectual debates that were unfolding across disciplines as the looming threat of global warming became more and more tangible. We were crossing the tipping point at an accelerated speed. It is in this context that Chakraborty proposed that the human species, now exercising geological force on the planet, on the scale of volcanoes or tectonic plates. This intervention, then, forces us to think of art history beyond both anthropocentric and biocentric models that privilege a singular autonomous agent, which itself is

a product of enlightenment thought. Such a line of inquiry can perhaps also offer a reconceptualization of art history's ontological and epistemological scope given the anthropocentric exceptionalism that we allocate to the conceptual category called a human.

- Sugata Ray: Let me offer an example from my book. In the 1590s an enormous sandstone temple to Krishna was consecrated in the pilgrimage center of Braj, the primary center for Krishna worship in India. By the 19th century, this temple had been described in architectural history as the most impressive religious edifice Hindu art has ever produced, and by now, the temple has become a key monument for the history of early modern architecture in India. Scholars have read the color of the sandstone used to construct both the Mogul capital very close to it and the temple to suggest that a new Hindu architectural typology emerged in this period in negotiation with contemporary news mogul architecture.
- Sugata Ray: Separated by 40 miles, both the Govind Dev Temple in Vrindavan in Braj and structures in Ugra's capital did share architectural similarities, for example the use of serpentine columns or even the osteo surface with limited motifs. For scholars, this temple, then, becomes especially critical for an analysis of an Islamicist take on early modern South Asia that underscores cultural and creative interactions across political and religious boundaries.
- Sugata Ray: Now, much of this critical revisionism has happened in the last 10 or 15 years, especially after right wing anti-Muslim politics has taken a virulent turn, further highlighting the importance of this temple that brought together Hindu and Muslim visual forms. In my book, which focuses on the art and architecture of this pilgrim at center, during the droughts of the little ice age, a period from the 1550s to the 1850s that saw droughts of unprecedented intensity in South America, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia.
- Sugata Ray: I take a different approach. Keeping in mind that much scholarship on climate change and art is located in the present, and the premodern or the preindustrial is often presented as a period of ecological plentitude. The idea of the idyllic, bucolic, the paradisiacal that always marks the premodern and contemporary scholarship. This book aimed to deracinate our presentist assumption about the past.
- Sugata Ray: For instance, the mineralogical composition of the temple suggests the temple was built using the same stone from a nearby hill that was considered alive by devotees and pilgrims. Now, we assume rocks are inert yet according to local myths, the hill was a manifest form of Krishna and could sense pain if he was hurt. This is a 19th century painting that shows the hill as a divine body. This is the hill, so you have this hill god assemblage happening here.
- Sugata Ray: Stone, in this context, was perceived as eminent with vital energy. One could contend that it was the alchemic quality of stone as elemental matter that concurrently made the hill a sacred site and a living being, and it was this sandstone that was used to construct the temple, just shaping the theological and political prominence of the Govind Dev Temple. Each chapter of this book focuses on a similar embodied ecological cluster in the pilgrimage site, water, the river Jumna, the Theophanic river Jumna, that traverses the region, land, the hill that bleeds forests, the sacred growths of Braj where Krishna roamed with his devotees and plants were seen as sentient beings, and finally architecture that works with the idea of ether, the natural element that holds together the principle components of Braj's sacred ecosystem.

Sugata Ray: Obscuring the boundaries between art and the natural environment, animate beings and inanimate matter and engagement with the epistemic subjectivity of rocks, plants, rivers, then allowed me to explore the contours of an eco-art history. The idea of a Hindu temple seems predisposed for sure a revisionist analysis. Histories of the Hindu temple from the early 20th century onwards have routinely emphasized the symbolic nature of architecture as a figurative representation of the universe, a microcosmic symbol of the primordial macrocosm. The new historicism of post-'80s art history has introduced questions of power, patronage, politics, but even today, most interpretations of the physical form of the temple customarily slip back to the symbolic reading of the temple as this representation of a primordial macrocosm.

Sugata Ray: And eco-art history, in contrast, demands that we take the natural environment as constitutive rather than either symbolic or emblematic. Obscuring object subject binaries, it is the very substance of quartzite rock that becomes entangled in relational flows that intimately connect representation, teleology and the natural environment. And eco-art history can become operative when the history of art and architecture brings together and reconciles phenomenology with the everyday materiality of the natural environment.

Sugata Ray: We can only talk about an eco-art history when we see the stone that I actually hacked from that particular rock going against every salt of ideas of how this temple is a sentient being or the rock is a sentient being, but what if we take this rock as Krishna. What sort of art history can emerge if this rock from this particular hill is seen as a form of Krishna. Such a gesture can have significant implications on how we engage with the materiality of art and architecture. In process, problematizing the purported rift between humans and the planet we inhabit, and that was the aim of the book. Thank you.

Whitney Davis: Thank you very much. That was very helpful. One of your pairs of slides reminded me of Fernand Braudel's famous comment in the preface to *The Mediterranean*, 1946 preface, "History can do more than look beyond walled gardens," so I thought I would start out by asking you to say a little bit about a risk for your project that might emerge from the history of art history itself, not the last 15 years, the history of art history that you referenced just now, but the sort of long duree of our discipline, which in some measure, kicked off, as you say rightly in your introduction of your book, kicked off with a very strong environmental determinism, climatological, geographical, topographical determinism, and I'm curious to hear you speak about how one doesn't risk reinscribing not so much the environmentalism but the determinism.

Whitney Davis: You have very interesting and delicate ways of describing the complex interrelationships that you're discussing but when push comes to shove and one asks you to specify the cause and effect relations that you're most strongly interested in excavating for us, in what sense can we avoid that earlier form of environmental determinism?

Sugata Ray: Right, and you're absolutely right. I think in a way we use this term in the last ... We have been talking about eco-art history in the last 10 or 15 years maybe, or even later, but from the very beginning, Winckelmann for instance would talk about the climate of the Mediterranean producing better quality art and its conceptual obverse was obviously the tropics, that is the colonies was produced bad art. So this sort of relationship between climate and art making, in a very deterministic way, was embedded within sort of early art history, but what I think one can do is move beyond causality and one could really use causality for any sort of intervention. Feminist art history could also be read as a deterministic art history in a way.

Sugata Ray: So, the problem of this determinism or trying to sort of read a very simplistic relationship between climate change and art is sort of a fraught question that really runs through the history of art history, but what I hope, and I really hope that this sort of new move that's happening with both a lot of colleagues in my department, for instance, have been talking about environment and art, and I can see Greg there who actually both writes and teaches eco-art, what I think the whole move is not too deterministic, is to really think about this as a form of creative practice.

Sugata Ray: So I would look at art making within a cluster. It's multi-sided. Certainly there is non-environmental politics, there is teleology, and climate change becomes one of the factors that lead to a rethinking of art and architectural history.

Whitney Davis: I pulled out some quotes from your book that kind of speak directly to your sense of the relationships you're pointing at. Intersections between visual practices and large-scale transformations in the natural environment, moving between the creative practices and the Turan's territorial climatic fields, seepages between the ecosystem and creative configuration, intersections between biophysics and the world of knowledge, cultural and power, rhizomelic entanglements between matter and life, shaped as it were by the global flow of water and air.

Whitney Davis: In light of that sense of your project, I'm curious about a couple of epistemic disjunctions, as you describe them, that you point to in your book, and sort of thread through much of its thematics. One about the time scale of the present day historian observer's *longue durée* apprehension of trans-territorial, trans-continental, trans-generational histories, and what might seem to be the more local, proximate histories of the participant agents in context.

Whitney Davis: What's your sense of how one puts together those two time scales or scopes of analysis? I'm reminded, in my neck of the woods, Brian Fagan, a climatological archeologist, is very fond of pointing to the disjunction between oral memory of climatic shift, about 10 generations, and anything more than 20 generations, sort of somehow outside of the visibility of people in question. I'm not going to defend that proposition. It's just his own, but it points to this sort of temporal scale or disjunction that we have to negotiate.

Sugata Ray: I think the question about climate change that a lot of scholars have brought up, how do you visualize climate change? You can feel climate change. You can touch climate change. You can sense climate change. But, as a discipline that works with visual representations, how do you visualize, let's say, 10,000 years of history, what are the tools that this discipline offers? Suddenly digital art history or big data can offer a way of thinking about this *longue durée* history but the question of memory, and what I would like to highlight is the question of the memory that land has. In a way, along with human memory, one has to learn how to read the environment, read marks on stone, marks on the river basin and how that can provide a way of thinking about long *durée* history.

Sugata Ray: Within the context of South Asia, we can, especially within the realm of the study of Hinduism, a lot of mythological practices do work with this idea of a *longue durée* history of the environment. For instance, in this particular site, the river moved at some point in the BCE, but even in the 16th century, even today, there are memories in terms of how places are named, of the river. So in a way, one has to start thinking about reading land and what sort of aesthetic practices can emerge if we try to think about the Earth itself as an archive, and that in a certain way brings together this question of our temporalities of one generation versus

this sort of a *longue durée* history that is central to thinking about climate change.

Whitney Davis: I remember in the conference that you and I organized in eco-art history a while back. It was striking how many of our presentations of our participants did circle back to reading the rocks, as it were. The question of rock art, of petroglyphs, of marking of the use and reuse of stone, and in your presentation here, you just referenced the same kind of process. The second disjunction that you pointed to in your book is ... let me just read a paragraph, again, from the intro and you again referenced it in your opening comment about dealing with a pre-Anthropocene but is early modern history.

Whitney Davis: "There is, of course, an epistemic difference between art produced under the menacing shadows of the expanding glaciers of the little ice age, and art produced under the existential threat imposed by humans themselves in the epoch of the Anthropocene. For while the little ice age was induced by geological forces, the Anthropocene was prompted by anthropogenic factors, albeit on the scale of the geological.

Whitney Davis: I'm curious to hear you say a little bit about something that's been riling up scholars' work in my neck of the woods, namely sort of setting aside the discourse of the Anthropocene and thinking more broadly about anthropogenic modifications of the planet that might have deep prehistories. Would you be prepared to speak about the anthropogenic effects of the visual practices you're dealing with? Perhaps maligned, perhaps beneficial, perhaps neutral? But nonetheless, the causality that is so important for thinking about the Anthropocene, from the human to natural? Would you draw out particular examples from your project that you would think of as having the status of anthropogenic modification?

Sugata Ray: Absolutely, and for instance, a chapter on forests looks at deforestation that happens in the region in the 18th century. I argue that as deforestation destroys the forests of this pilgrimage site, there is an attempt to try to think about how one talks about sacred groves, and you have the construction of these new groves in the 18th century that are emulating the forests that are there in literature. So literary practices talk about Braj as this *vana*, or this forest, where Krishna roams with his devotees, but the irony of the fact is, by the 18th century, there are no forests.

Sugata Ray: So how do you negotiate that crisis in mythopoetics with deforestation? What I do this chapter on forests is look at both painting and architecture, but also gardens and see how artists, poets, pilgrims, patrons are trying to negotiate this crisis that is both mythological but also environmental, and I argue that as the groves, as the forests are being reduced, architecture is changing, and there's a new architecture where ornamentation or the depiction of plants and vines become important, but also the construction of these new gardens in the 18th century where one has to literally negotiate one's bodily presence. I mean, it's a longer argument, but essentially the idea of this idyllic, pastoral, bucolic landscape was a human construction in the 18th century to recreate the forests of poetry.

Whitney Davis: I see Tim waving, so we are now going to turn to the audience with the roving mic. Please, if you have thoughts or questions, interventions, comments?

Speaker 5: Thanks, Sir Sugata. This is a very thought-provoking sort of thing, but I'm interested in your take on this very archaic notion of the personhood of natural

phenomena, right? But the Jumna does have subjectivity. The Jumna is also a goddess, and can cry for help, and this is ingrained in people's thoughts. The Hinduism and so on, the literature, but how do you get people to understand that or generalize this?

Speaker 5: Certain spots that kind of fetishize are subjected to these certain kinds of care and protection. On the other hand, you can love these rivers to death by the offerings into them and so on, and actually being destroyed through the Anthropocene as well as geologically, because we can lose those glaciers, right? But they're also polluting the river grossly and this is the cry for help. So, is there any way of connecting that with people's sense of these things?

Sugata Ray: This is sort of a question that I have been thinking about, is the question of how do you talk about, let's say, the landscape as alive? My concern with trying to generalize is to move out of my specific site of Braj, is because this is what Modi does. This is right wing fascism. This is eco fascism of the prime minister of India who stands by Varanasi in the pilgrimage site of Varanasi and tweets that he will save Ganga Ma. At the same time, when he is producing these genocidal sort of riots against Muslim, so my fear of trying to sort of move from the specific to a general is that it reduces India or South Asia to a Hindu epistemology.

Sugata Ray: When we think about, let's say, a site like Varanasi, it has a Muslim history as well, so how do we negotiate the Muslim history of Varanasi with this idea of the goddess as sacred, as living, as eminent? And of course, this is a form of green washing and Modi did nothing. Even though his whole electoral campaign was based on saving the sacred landscape of India, he did nothing about it, and his whole electoral cycle has passed. So, again, it's not just India. That's what we see in many parts of the world. Christian evangelical groups in the US are doing the very climate denialism in the US, again, using Christian theology.

Sugata Ray: So, I wonder if we would like to move out of the specific to a more general. But certainly I am interested in thinking about ways of trying to use this project or do the book that I have, to think about conservation discourses today. But, I would be worried about using a Hindu epistemology for ecological conservation precisely because of right wing politics in India.

Speaker 6: First, thank you. This extends Whitney's question about the temporal horizon of landscape, and the temporal horizon of devotional religion. So, in part I'm thinking through Jack Holly's revisionist history of [foreign language 00:31:05] of devotion, which centers much of its critical momentum in the period that you're engaging, and you're making me think about Holly's work in a very different way, and in part, the plasticity of a landscape. This sense of its radical change. To what extent do conceptions of play, that is, lila, et cetera, central to the poetics of devotion ... Are they part of the formal plasticity you're trying to show us?

Sugata Ray: I think it's central. I mean, play is central to this relationship. I mean, in this forest, for instance, there are beautiful descriptions of how you play with the sacred vines of Braj and how you have a corporeal bodily engagement. So, the idea of ludic play, pleasure, becomes fundamental to think about the eco aesthetics that I'm talking about here. I think in a way there is a lot of theorization on play, not just within South Asian traditions but from animal studies, from other arenas where this intersection between the human and the non-human can be played out.

- Sugata Ray: So for me, played, both with its deep theology within lila but also play as a political practice that has been used by scholars in many fields becomes an enabling technique to think about how do I relate to this forest? How do I relate to these plants? I play with them.
- Speaker 7: Could you go into the mythology of Krishna's The Mountain? I was also wondering if there are pre-Hindu elements to that?
- Sugata Ray: Absolutely. Scholars have argued about sort of pre-Hindu Naga worship, serpent worship for instance, or even to worship the hill, which is what scholars would argue have written on early Vaishnavism.
- Whitney Davis: There's tree worship in early Christianity too.
- Sugata Ray: True. That what happens in let's say the first centuries of the common era, is that pre- sort of indigenous practices of tree worship, indigenous practices of rock worship are appropriated by Vaishnavism, to articulate sort of a new relationship with the land. So certainly there is a deep connection both with indigenous cultures, of thinking about Naga serpent worship. There's cultures of rock worship, tree worship, and that becomes part of early bhakti. But, again, I would also say that things change in the 16th century. Where I'm interested is the intersection between Islamic aesthetics not to think about a long continuity that was somehow untouched. Sort of a langadiri sort of history of Hinduism, but Hinduism is also transforming.
- Sugata Ray: So for me, the temple architecture that we see here is both in conversation with that past, but also in conversation with Islamic notions of nature, of paradise, of gardens. Islamic gardens. So I think one has to see both diachronically and synchronically.
- Whitney Davis: Question? Let me push you, then, Sugata, on the notion of a non-anthropocentric aesthetics, because some might argue that it's been a crucial way of thinking about the specifically aesthetic domain that humans make unreciprocated portrayals of the other, of the non-human, of the natural. So if you were to move decisively from an anthropocentric aesthetics to a non-anthropocentric one, we might have to imagine situations in which the other, that is the non-human, the animal, does in fact reciprocally portray its other, namely the human. What would that look like in the kinds of materials you're working with?
- Sugata Ray: Right. So that's the next book talk on my second book.
- Whitney Davis: Okay. That was not a planned segue.
- Sugata Ray: So, we work with material that is decidedly anthropocentric. Art, architecture, literary cultures, but I am trying to think about how do we talk about, let's say, art painting, to see it as a transcript of the intersection between the non-human and the human. That is, how do we rethink the history of art where we see the natural world not just as an object of study, but pressuring the artist, pressuring the human actor? So, for me, then, painting ... In my next book, for instance, I'm looking at paintings of animals and trying to argue that we also have to see that particular representation of animals as sort of the product of that intersection between the human, the artist, and the animal who is being portrayed.
- Sugata Ray: Again, drawing from philosophical conversation on play, we can talk about how a painting can be a product of the play between the human and the non-human. So, that's what I'm doing in my second book, trying to look at Indian ocean



histories and looking at animals and other life forms, and how did they push this archive that we art historians work with? And what new histories can emerge if we think about a non-human animal as a co-producer?

Whitney Davis:

Tim.

Tim:

I was wondering if you could talk about nature, landscape and time? That seems, to me, an interesting way to think about some of these issues, given the tension between the way in which time has been basically taken over by productivity, capitalism, notions of progress versus natural rhythms. I'm also thinking of even ... This is an off the wall reference, but your talk made me think of it. There's this extraordinary moment in one of Montagne's essays, his essay on the cannibals, where he talks about how the river near his home in Southern France has changed course, and he expands from this to this astonishing sense of the kind of relativity of knowledge, that we thought it was over here and now it's over there. That gets him, eventually, to the moment in which he's able to accept the alterity of the South American natives in a way which completely decenters a kind of European notion.

Tim:

So there's the sense of kind of reading the landscape and using the movement of the landscape and the temporality of the landscape as a different way of conceiving knowledge. Could you talk about that?

Sugata Ray:

Absolutely, and I'm glad that this image, this sort of ... this is on the screen. What, for me, is very interesting is this idea of a sort of a shared space, of sentience between humans and plants emerge in the 18th century. This is not sort of a primordial, timeless space. This is precisely when, if you think about Thomas Ginsburg, you think about Raymond Williams and how the countryside is being produced in England, as this bucolic, pastoral landscape, precisely because of new capital formations. The more there is industrial labor, the more land is being used. You have this push towards pastorality.

Sugata Ray:

Now, we could, in a way, read this as part of that larger colonial project of imagining the land or landscape that begins in 18th century industrial England. Now, I try to argue, that this is using some ... a historian called Ranajit Guha who writes ... who's sort of the founder of Subaltern Studies Collective, that this is a history from below. So certainly there is a top down history of environmental governance in the 18th century that generates this idea of pastorality and bucolicity, but what happens if we think about other practices, that the margins of those statist, industrialized, modern practices that are really global at this point.

Sugata Ray:

So whether we see it as a practice of alterity or a practice from below, and what sort of new histories of the environment can emerge if we listen to these voices and listen to these new practices? And again, in South America, in Asia, in Africa, precisely at the moment of global capital formation, we see a whole range of practices that resist that top down history of environment. So I think it's a very interesting question, is that this is precisely the birth of modernity. It's the 18th century.

Speaker 10:

Yeah, that's a wonderful point because Tire modern ... early modern and modern Krishna cult is a kind of nostalgia for a kind of imagined pastoral past, and has terrifying implications for contemporary situation, but this entire bovine-centric formation of Hinduism, and going back to this kind of cult of the cow and this kind of pastoralist, imagined Braj and I think this is occurring around the same time that you're seeing that kind of pastoral development in England, also

harking back to an imagined Greco Roman pastoralism where you see, then, all the literature and the plays and the poems about shepherds and swains. I think it is a response to modernity in a sense, or early modernity anyways.

- Sugata Ray: In India, the colonial science. I mean, this is when science, as a practice is emerging. You have colonial medicine, you have modern science. So, this pastorality that we see here ... Now, I am not sure if I see it as resistance, but certainly it's a different form of imagining the landscape, and again, talking about cows ... So I had a chapter on cows in my PhD which I refuse to bring in my book...
- Speaker 10: Do note that there's hardly one of your slides that doesn't have at least one monkey in it.
- Sugata Ray: There are monkeys. I write about monkeys, peacocks, no cows.
- Whitney Davis: We have time for a couple more questions from the floor. Right here?
- Speaker 11: Thank you, professor, for such a thought provoking presentation. Going back to the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric aesthetic, it's really interesting how we talked about the mountain being worshiped as Krishna himself, right? So, giving inert objects life is nothing new in art history, right? We talked a lot in class about how Hindu gods ... the statues of them. They're only alive once priests consecrate them, right? So that's with human intervention and human modification. That rock is carved and consecrated by human, while here, this natural mountain with zero human modification is, as well, worshiped as an object in addition to being a sacred site. So, how did these two perspectives or methods differ and how do they relate?
- Sugata Ray: That's a very good question and, as we've talked in class, literally before a sculpture is consecrated, it is a piece of stone. It's supposed to be inert, right? But it's only after a certain ritual that a piece of stone can become a god. And again, this idea of mountains being worshiped is also not very new. You have practices of mountain worship but what I wanted to do in this book is try to look at climate change and see how a pressure on the land, because of the changing climate, led to a new teleological practice. So we could go back to the temples that we've discussed in class, for instance, in Khajuraho and see if 10th century climate change transformed Hindu practices. These are projects that can be done and it will be exciting to rethink all of these sites that we have discussed in class.
- Sugata Ray: Certainly with the sites ... We've talked about sachi in class and there is a scholar who's working on hydro infrastructure and looking at pilgrimage, looking at stupa worship, but seeing how hydro infrastructure informed, let's say, early Buddhist practice. So the question, then, is to think about climate change in a natural environment at an intersection of all of these ritual theological practices that we have discussed about tree worship, stone worship.
- Whitney Davis: Final question? If not, then I'm going to ask a final question. As you know, there is in the world of ecological, environmental, cultural and art histories, a whole other strand, theoretically speaking, namely an evo devo, evolutionarily developmental Darwinian historical aesthetics in which an extra human process, for example, of sexual selection, drives the historical account of art making. I'm not sure that that's incompatible with a kind of eco-art history, environmental art history you're interested in, but I'd be curious about your take on that, that there is this other way of proceeding eco environmentally and evolutionary in a much more strongly Darwinian language. How do you feel about that? I mean, we've

had distinguished visitors on campus just recently, defending their book-length studies of this particular problematic and we'll have them back.

Sugata Ray: It's sort of the concern ... I mean, there is a fear of that sort of evolutionary model of art history, because it very quickly slips into sort of fascism, because we have seen over and over again in the last 150 years how environmental determinism and fascism work very close hand in hand, but certainly putting aside that strand, whether we talk about Nazi green washing, which is also part of that sort of evolutionary deterministic logic of thinking about the human body but also the environment.

Sugata Ray: For instance, I'm looking at species that are now extinct or have become extinct, and what can art history ... For instance, the dodo. So, my next book on the Indian Ocean is looking at the dodo and trying to think about the history of the dodo, which has to be a natural history, but also a history of the art.

Sugata Ray: So, species extinction is a place where I'm curious to think about these intersections between bio histories, natural histories and-

Whitney Davis: We definitely share that interest. I'm very interested in the way in which the actual practice of making pictures of the natural world enables human beings to gain genetic control over other species and, eventually, in some cases, eliminate them. So I think we'll be in conversation about that project. Thank you very much, everybody.

Sugata Ray: Thank you.

Timothy Hampton: We hope you enjoyed this Berkeley Book Chat, and we encourage you to join us in person or via podcast for future programs in this series.