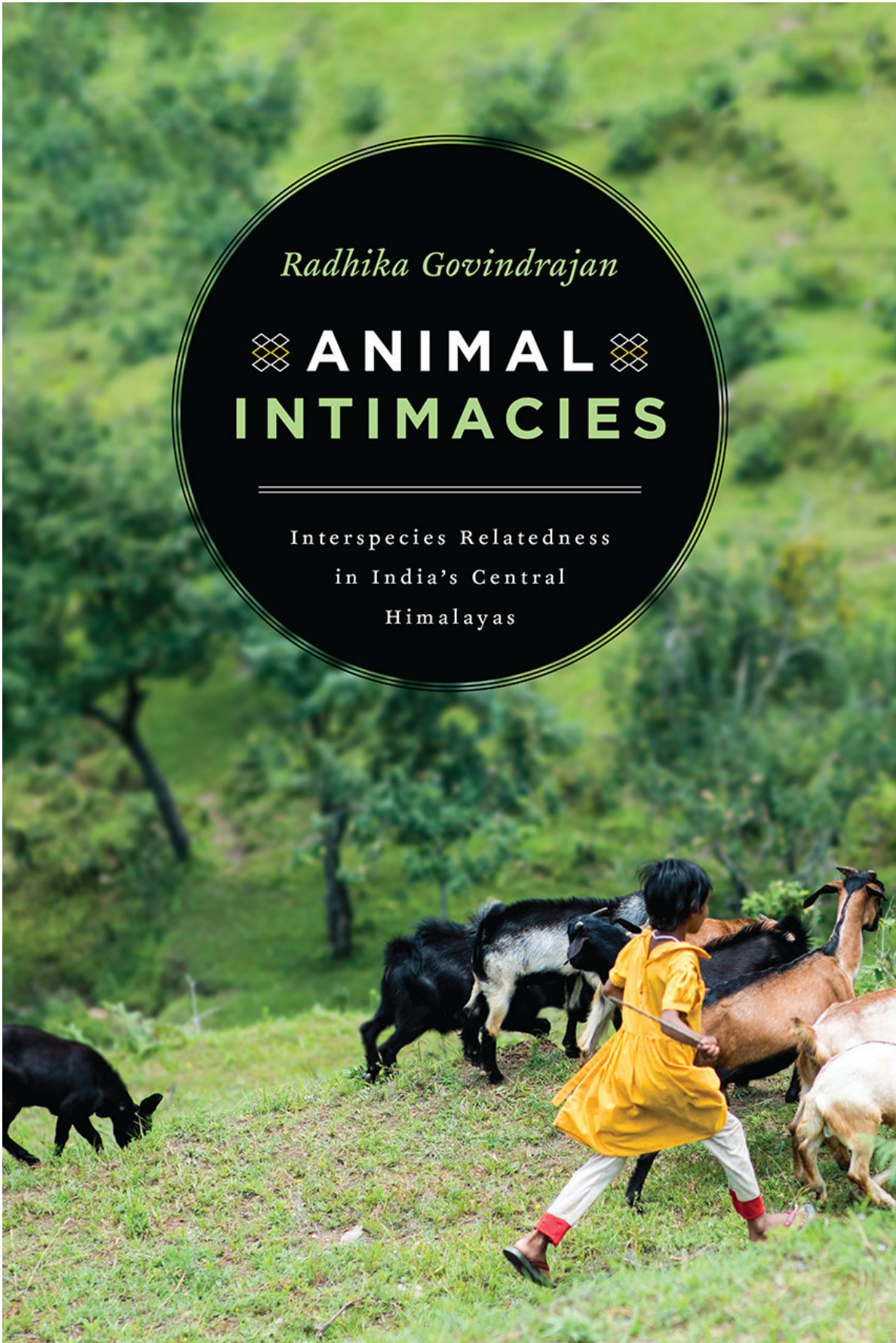


Anthropology professor writes book on the bonds between humans, animals

June 13 2018, by Kim Eckart



“Animal Intimacies,” by UW assistant professor of anthropology Radhika Govindrajan, was published by University of Chicago Press.

Radhika's Govindrajan's book "Animal Intimacies" started attracting attention before it was even available to readers. A University of Washington assistant professor of anthropology since 2015, Govindrajan specializes in animal studies, and in the politics and culture of the Central Himalayas, where much of the research for this book was conducted.

"Animal Intimacies," published in May 2018 by University of Chicago Press, recounts the varying relationships people have with [animals](#)—as companions, as sources of food and as performers of work—and addresses not only why those relationships exist, but also why they're significant.

In spring 2017, "Animal Intimacies" won the Edward Cameron Dimock, Jr., Prize in the Indian Humanities from the American Institute of Indian Studies; two articles that were modified into book chapters also were recognized by the American Anthropological Association.

Based on the title alone, this is an unusual topic for a book. Describe what it's about and why you chose this focus.

RG: The book asks what it means to live and die in relation to other animals. Through an ethnographic interpretation of intimate, embodied multispecies relationships between humans and animals in the mountain

villages of India's Central Himalayan region, it traces how human pasts, presents and futures come to be bound up with those of the many animals who share this world with them, creating knots of relatedness between them that trouble the supposed naturalness of categories such as human and animal, nature and culture, kinship and biology. I argue that questions of ethics and justice are not transcendental affairs, but are negotiated in this everyday, messy world of multispecies relatedness. To do this, the book focuses on issues like animal sacrifice, meat politics, [wildlife conservation](#) and animal folklore, among others.

I became interested in the question through some early research I conducted on wildlife conservation in colonial India. In recent times, there have been really intense debates in India about what form conservation should take. I was struck by how much these conversations were using old ways of referring to the problem—that people are unable to control their wildness around wild animals, or that you can't trust villagers who live on the fringes of national parks to not poach animals there. I became interested in how ordinary people navigate their relationships with the animals they share their world with, in the context of larger societal pressures on them to live a certain way.

How important was location to your study? Could examples of human/animal connection be found anywhere in the world?

This is an issue that one can explore anywhere. In the United States, we have a billion-dollar pet industry which, when juxtaposed against the industrial slaughter of animals for food, poses questions about how we come to value certain animal lives over others. What drew me to the Himalayas is that wildlife conservation has been historically important and deeply fraught in this region. It's also a place where practices involving animals, such as ritual sacrifice, have become increasingly

controversial. The people in this region have always been viewed by mainstream Hindus as somewhat unorthodox, and their practices have come under a lot of scrutiny in recent years. I was curious about the ethical challenges that was presenting and how people were able to navigate this by drawing on their actual experiences of living with animals.

How did current events and discussions in India affect the dynamics between people and animals in the Central Himalayas?

The book engages the definitions of what it means to live ethically with animals, and how those definitions are being narrowed at this moment in history. Who gets to define what counts as ethical behavior toward animals, and what other politics does that intersect with? In India, vegetarianism is inextricably linked to caste; many upper-caste people are vegetarian, and use matters of diet to distinguish themselves from those whom they see as lower in the caste hierarchy. Another phenomenon I'm interested in is the burgeoning animal rights movement in India. Recognizing that animal rights is a historical phenomenon, and very much a product of its times, is really important. Early animal rights movements in England, for example, were caught up in broader conversations about race and class in some troubling ways. This book tries to locate [animal rights](#) in the moment: I'm interested in its particular manifestation in India, its class politics, its caste politics and its religious politics.

What do you think is the most important message from the book?

I think it's that the singularity of animals matters. We tend to think of animals in species terms, as nameless beings who are part of a larger

aggregate. For me, the important thing is relatedness, how people come to think of their lives as being tied, in some ways, to that of a particular animal. Whether it was the goat a woman sacrificed three years ago, or the wild boar that someone encountered in a park one day, that's what I want to play up in the book. As anthropologists, we spend a lot of time thinking about individual people; I want to extend that to animals. That's one of the joys of anthropology—smallness matters.

Emotion is often removed from research, but in the book, you relate some poignant moments with the people you met. What struck you about these encounters?

I write a lot about the violence of human relationships with animals, and in this research I was really touched by how much people were affected personally by those acts of violence. For me, the ethical emerged in the ordinary: I saw how much people were struggling with the fact that they had slaughtered a goat, or that they had sold a cow to a butcher. I found little gestures of grief, remorse or atonement that were really poignant. So while there is an act of violence or killing, there are also these gestures that say so much.

What can a reader take from this book and apply, or simply reflect upon, in their own life?

Writing this book gave me new appreciation for the ways in which our lives are constantly shaped by encounters with animals. It could give readers avenues to think about their own ways of being in the world, and what discussions of living ethically might look like. This book demonstrates how [people](#) live their lives through their relationships with others. There are relationships you might have with a particular animal

that change the way you are oriented in the world. There's something really powerful in that.

Provided by University of Washington

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