

Messy Eating

CONVERSATIONS ON ANIMALS AS FOOD

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it's not the world that I want to live in. But I also want my veganism to challenge a certain romanticization of human and animal relationships that can too easily ignore power inequalities and exploitation. I think Claire Jean Kim has a wonderful quote at the end of the Introduction to a special issue of *American Quarterly* that she and Carla Freccero edited. She says that it's not enough to love animals. I think she's referring to a sort of romanticization of having a relationship with an animal and loving that animal or loving the practices that are around those relationships with animals. I think what she's saying is that when you do love something, it's really important to also realize that love isn't enough. It's not enough for my dog Bailey that I love him; I also need to give him longer walks and think ethically about what would make his life better and try to really practice those things.

SK: It's been really incredible talking to you, and you've made me think about some of the assumptions about disability that are built into our questions, so that was a great learning experience for me. Is there anything you want to add?

ST: Not at the moment, but I'm sure I will think of things. This has been really lovely; I appreciate it. And I really look forward to the book because it's getting at some issues that are really hard to grapple with.

Asking Hard Questions

Neel Ahuja

Interdisciplinary scholar Neel Ahuja discusses how his early animal rights activism has informed his pursuit of questions concerning the animal and the environment within postcolonial studies, and how postcolonial studies is critical to how he views the fields of posthumanism and animal studies. Naming veganism as a "limited tactic" that works to imagine ecological futures distinct from the period of mass extinction in which we live, Ahuja stresses the importance of conceptualizing "species" as a political question and not simply an ethical one. He offers sound advice for early-career scholars who must navigate eating and interviewing simultaneously, along with his thoughts on the potential for kinship and the politics of the killjoy. We interviewed Ahuja by Skype on September 21, 2016.

SAMANTHA KING: What is the primary focus of your academic work? Why you do what you do?

NEEL AHUJA: I think that is a question a lot of people are thinking about, regardless of what field or discipline they are working in these days. Especially with the privatization of university education, there's a whole discourse in the humanities now about the "university in crisis,"

particularly about the idea of critical thinking and the position of the critical intellectual as something being monetized. So is it possible to have the purpose of one's academic work exceed the purview of what the institution says? It is an interesting set of questions to think about. In the U.S., a lot of this discourse is being generated around how graduate students are being treated and how their prospects for employment are shrinking, how they're being turned into a permanent precarious class of employee. In that context, I actually think there are moments to resist some of the ideas about "rejecting the institution" as a whole and perhaps instead fighting for its invigoration. I think that critical academic work has an important place in that.

Coming from training in postcolonial studies and particularly in the literary-cultural aesthetic track of postcolonial studies, there is this inside/outside dimension to where the work fits into academia. There's a relationship with social movements, and much of the work is an attempt to reconstruct an account of colonial modernity, of how we come to the colonial present by looking at various histories, imaginaries, social practices—including eating and agricultural practices—that have been erased, marginalized, and suppressed by the current configurations of state and capital. As someone who works in postcolonial studies and who is trained in thinking about representation—about literary, cultural, aesthetic forms—I do feel that academic work has instrumental purposes. It is meant to engage with certain questions that exceed the bounds of the academy. In its inevitably constrained position inside educational institutions generated by colonialism, postcolonial studies attempts to extend intellectual projects that were generated by liberation movements coming from what we can now call the Global South against 500 years of colonial rule. Part of my academic work has been to grapple with how that extends into the realm of interspecies relations, the ways in which the planet, land, species—including humans but other species as well—have been "engineered" into colonial modernity and how we might reimagine worlds which have been suppressed by that colonial modernity, and worlds that might yet come from it—or through or against it. The academic work doesn't always mean putting all of your political ideals or agendas on the table immediately; it does involve some reflection, depending on what you're writing and what the object you are analyzing is. It may be relatively technical or it might not bring the biographical in at every moment. But I think for me the university is an institution where this kind of imagining can or at least should still take place. It's unfortunate that to a large extent, the left in North America

and Europe has increasingly been forced to retrench into the university, *out* of the public sphere in some sense. But that's something I hope we can continue to struggle against. So I think regardless of what fields or disciplines we're working in, the move to corporatize the university and turn it into a career-training field for students is something that works against these broader intellectual currents that at least I'm invested in.

SK: That's a great answer. I appreciate how you took a broad structural approach and discussed the corporatization of the university and academic precariat. Bringing in those issues adds a dimension to the conversation that hasn't arisen in other interviews. It also makes a nice segue into the next question, which is how you came to write about what you call in your book the "government of species." Maybe you could also talk about your key intellectual influences as you did that work.

NA: Of course. You mentioned Donna in that earlier discussion we had. Haraway's work has been very influential for me, although I will give you a different answer to the eating question than she did. Her work was, for me, influential in terms of the questions and options I thought about as a grad student, but it also offered a pathway to thinking about relations that seemed to be divided; human-animal or nature-society are common divisions that often ground the disciplines that we work in—certainly literature, when you're trained in a literature department like I was where, let's say, in my case, the Frankfurt school was a critical set of conversations that grounded our training. And that Marxist approach to understanding and reflecting on aesthetic questions tended to question in what ways capitalism and other structural forces determine the formal qualities of our aesthetic lives, including literature and other cultural products. And Donna's work was really inspiring in that context of criticism, especially her early work which is really explicit about its Marxist-feminist commitments. Her work is great about toggling between the aesthetic and the material and understanding how the aesthetic can mask the material, but also work to reform the material. So, as opposed to some other major names you might associate with animal studies more recently, Donna's work stood out to me before animal studies was turned into this field that could become institutionalized.

That said, in the introduction to the preface of the book I'm also trying to think between feminist science studies and postcolonial studies. In terms of how postcolonial studies informs my work, it is critical to how I end up viewing a field like animal studies or methodological orientations like posthumanism or new materialism, for example. The question of

nature is something that has been repeatedly invoked throughout decolonial struggles prior to the institutionalization of postcolonial studies as a field, but it has also been really significant to how postcolonial theorists conceptualize transnational power formations. We'll get into this with some of the other questions, but thinking about the "government of species," that concept I put forward in the book, comes about, for me, by thinking about colonial sovereignty as a problematic that is challenged and theorized intellectually through decolonial struggles and then later through second-order reflections on those struggles in a field called postcolonial studies. Part of why we need second-order reflection on them is because postcolonial studies is all about the limits of anti-colonial nationalism. And we might consider questions about animals and the environment as being one arena in which anti-colonial nationalism has failed to substantively redress legacies of colonialism. It was important for me to put forward a theoretical device for integrating these two perspectives, postcolonial studies and feminist science studies, which is how I began to think about the concept of "government of species." Thinking about *species* as a term for politics, rather than a biological term or a term for ethics, was really important. Part of the theme of this, for me, is that the animal question is a political question, not simply an ethical question.

SK: Could you say more about that? This has come up in earlier interviews. Why is it important for you to approach the animal question as a political question, and what gets lost when we approach it as an ethical question?

NA: There are two ways I would like to address that. The first one is more biographical, and the second one involves thinking about these fields and how they're institutionalized. So I have been vegan for eighteen years, and part of my political education involved my coming to understand the ways that industrialized factory farming works in this country, and joining organizations that were working to contest the ways that industrialized factory farming has negative, deep violent impacts for many species, including humans, and for the broader planetary systems in which we live. A significant part of this political education for me was my coming to an ethical understanding about the recognition of the lifeworlds and interests of nonhuman species. I still believe that this is too often and too quickly dismissed in some sections of the left. As a teenager, I saw one of these flyers in a bathroom stall that had pictures of what goes on in a slaughter operation and I decided at that point that I was going to

look more into what industrialized factory farming was. That said, I also have this family history of coming from northern India; my parents immigrated to the United States in 1965. Prior to 1965, there was very little Indian immigration to the United States because the quota system gave priority to European immigrants, particularly western and northern Europeans. But in 1965, the first year Indian immigrants were given broader quotas for entry, my parents came to the U.S. And we have a tradition of vegetarianism in my family, one that is not necessarily oriented—at least in my family—around the ethical question of what it means to eat animals or to eat their bodies and body products but is more an offshoot of a Hindu nationalism that was deeply entrenched in right-wing communal struggles that were targeting Muslims and Christians. This isn't something I necessarily understood growing up. Being exposed to arguments about the ethical protection of animals was important, but I couldn't understand my family's own dietary practices in that light necessarily. In fact when I first became vegetarian as an eleven-year-old, and then vegan as a seventeen-year-old, my parents were resistant in both instances, despite the fact that we largely ate vegan anyway. So the way that animal activists' writings often focus on the ethical dimension of eating animals in some sense feels somewhat provincial to me, knowing more about this history now. And also knowing about the global inequalities wherein meat eating is experienced as a luxury in most parts of the world. Thus to treat a prohibition on eating animals, or animal products, as a universal ethical ideal is a little bit troubled by the fact that many people, for the majority of their diet, are default vegetarian; they may want to eat meat, or they may occasionally be able to eat meat. To view meat eating as simply an ethical transgression, I think, misses the political context behind these choices. It suggests there is a liberal individual who operates freely in the world and is unconstrained by the forces that, in some sense, determine our diets. There are countries in the world like the United States where huge agricultural subsidies support the animal agriculture industries, making animal-based foods artificially cheap. The capacity to be vegan grows with one's economic means in such a society. I don't think that is *always* the case; there are people who engage in vegetarianism and veganism across class boundaries. I am acutely aware of the ways that veganism can be mobilized as a progressive class politics, and also a regressive class, communal, or religious politics, as it has been in India. That is one side of why I think about these questions around eating from a political rather than an ethical perspective. I think of veganism as an important

yet limited tactic for people in countries where there is an advanced factory-farming system that is industrialized.

The second part to this is that postcolonial studies comes out of a moment in India, involving the Subaltern Studies Collective, a group of historians who are remembered as formative for the development of postcolonial studies as a field. They were interested in agrarian questions, and their work, particularly that of Ranajit Guha, focuses on peasant insurgency in rural areas in India. Postcolonial studies as a field comes about in part because of crises of nationalism that occurred after the independence of India, one of which has to do with the fact that people who live in rural areas, the peasantry, the Dalits, and the Adivasis in India continue to face horrible discrimination. In many cases they're still living off the land or in pastoral forms of agriculture. I don't think the rise of animal studies or food studies in the Global North has adequately grappled with the agrarian-studies basis of our anti-colonial critique. That is something I have a ton to say about, but I am going to cut it off there. These anti-colonial struggles are always struggles about nature and food, and I think that although agrarian studies is a kind of unsexy field compared to animal studies or food studies, it is really important not to dismiss that area.

SK: Thank you for that complex and provocative answer. When you said in our e-mail exchange that you were interested in exploring food studies and animal studies from the vantage point of colonial geopolitics, anti-colonial nationalism, and postcolonial studies, is part of that project to reconstruct a different genealogy of food and animal studies?

NA: Yes. That is something that, especially earlier in my career, I was already interested in. The first essay I published in animal studies was a short piece called *Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World*. That was a moment when I was reflecting on the extent to which animal studies was starting to become institutionalized in North America, Britain, and Australia—and missing these other histories of inquiry about human-animal relations. The fact that none of the main animal theorists have grappled with Gandhi's body of writing is a mystery. Not that I am really into Gandhi; I actually find his politics to be terribly regressive. But I think his animal writings are super interesting, and he really developed an ethical discourse about animals, one that may not necessarily be legible as a kind of animal rights or animal liberationist view on human-animal relations—in part because Gandhi was grappling with how to feed a largely poor country that was coming to independence. How do

we grapple with the logistical challenges that arise when you're building a national agriculture? Keep in mind that under colonial rule famines were a regular occurrence in India. Even though hunger is still a huge problem there with rising economic inequality, the life expectancy in India shot up—way up—after independence. So there are reasons Gandhi didn't turn his own ethical practice of refusing animal products into a universal ethics for all Indians. There are moments in his writings on animals where he says, "You must demand of the animal the same respect that you accord it." I don't know how that would work exactly, but he claims that if in India monkeys are considered agricultural pests, and if the monkey cannot respect your own needs to cultivate the land, you may need to eradicate the pest. He writes this even though his own dietary practice was in most cases vegan: He hated milk, and in India eggs are considered a nonvegetarian food. Gandhi went through periods where he just ate fruit and went through a lot of questionable dietary experiences; we don't need to get into all of that. But this is one symptom of thinking of the genealogy of animal theory beginning with Peter Singer. By that point you've already reached the neoliberal moment, the moment where the West is de-industrializing and where it can't conceptualize food practices that are widely decentralized, where peasant and pastoral agricultural practices are the norm. That's part of why I think questioning the very field formation of animal studies and food studies through agrarian studies can be a really useful exercise in trying to think historically about how we've come to define our analytic objects in these ways.

SK: We may have touched on this already, but I wonder if you want to say anything more either about the critique you offer in the preface of your book regarding the racialized or orientalist tendencies of posthumanism, or about these bigger questions around colonial geopolitics in relation to food studies and animal studies.

NA: The only thing I would add about the book is that the preface is roughly oriented toward thinking about the theoretical turns in the humanities and social sciences toward posthumanism, animal studies, object-oriented ontologies, and new materialisms—where nonhuman objects play significant aesthetic, political, and social roles and might be considered actants, with their own sites of agency. So for me, I do think it is an arbitrary exclusion to say that animals and other species have no political agency, or produce no historical change within the political domain. But I don't think it's particularly useful to do this analogical

operation where we say, "There are established political struggles around race, gender, sexuality, nation, and 'species' is one of the next frontiers of it." Martha Nussbaum calls species one of the frontiers of justice. I think that analogical form of thinking is also at the basis for a certain tendency in animal studies to conceive of human violence against animals as being this broad scope of violence from which we can say, "Look, human violence against humans—this is a form of animal violence that is a small portion of the larger, overwhelming interspecies violence that exists in the world." There ends up being a weighing of oppressions that I think is completely counterproductive for producing actual political solidarities around interspecies questions. I think it's also totally ahistorical. If you think about colonialism as a process that has worked in tandem with the rise of capitalism, part of what colonialism is about is appropriating what Jason Moore calls "cheap natures": the labor and energy forces of species and environmental systems that can be used for accumulation once those forces and labors are transformed into commodities. So specific historical conjunctures come about in which both human and nonhuman energies are increasingly turned into labor for the production of certain forms of capital, and for reproducing types of circulation and types of national state formations that increasingly appropriate human and animal bodies. I don't think there's been this primeval, you know, "Humans have always exploited animals" and "Humans have always exploited each other," and one of the two is bigger than the other. There are systemic forms that bring different bodies into relation through colonialism and capitalism, and it's necessary to think about the government of species in terms of these systems rather than having an objectified field of identities that can be crossed with one another.

VICTORIA MILLIOUS: We can always come back to these points, but we'll move along now to some of the more personal questions. You've touched on this, but can you describe your relationship to consuming meat or other animal products, and to what extent this has been an issue or preoccupation for you? How have your ideas and bodily practices with regard to animal consumption evolved?

NA: Sure. As I mentioned, I have a tradition of vegetarianism within my own family. It's not that everybody was vegetarian, but that certain relatives who were active in specific organizations associated with the Indian nationalist movement gave up meat. Also the general practice was that women did not eat meat, up until the last generation. Now my relatives in India basically all eat meat. This was interesting because my

mom doesn't actually eat meat—I have never witnessed it at least—but chose to raise me as a meat eater, including feeding me beef—which would *not* fly among my family in India. The current government in India has been encouraging a kind of cow protection vigilantism and beef is either explicitly or implicitly banned in most parts of the country, beef in particular. But I grew up eating this meat. And at age eleven, after a debate we had about vivisection in my fifth-grade class, I decided I wasn't going to eat meat anymore. I mentioned the bathroom flyer I saw at age seventeen, and within a few months I decided to give up all animal products. When I went to college, we started a campus animal activist organization and for three years a close friend and I ran that organization. So I was very much involved in the mainstream animal rights movement for a few years. During that time I met a lot of national activists and was lucky to be exposed to an organization called Feminists for Animal Rights. Although their own writings weren't necessarily focused on race and colonialism, they helped to gather activists who were thinking intersectionally about species, race, colonialism, gender, sexuality—outside some of the main animal rights conferences. This was really influential for me around age twenty when I was going to these meetings and realizing that the mainstream animal rights movement was very particular about excluding these other forms of inquiry.

Around that time, I also worked as an intern for one summer with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine [PCRM] in D.C. I was researching U.S. agricultural policy for them, so I learned the ins and outs of the farm subsidy system, and how that system was largely oriented toward building cheap meat, and how it covered that by making grain subsidies the primary target. So monoculture grains are farmed in huge amounts as animal feed, but if you focus on producing large amounts of monoculture grains, they can theoretically also be used for human consumption. They can be considered a food security thing, and it doesn't look like you're promoting very narrow interests of specific commodity agriculture. This is why meat subsidies are basically disguised as food security for the U.S., but so much of that grain is used in an inefficient system to feed animals rather than feed humans, and then there is a much smaller amount of food based on all that energy input that comes out as large slaughtered animals.

VM: What year was that, when you did this internship and research?

NA: It was in 2000. These were the early years of my work as an animal activist and PCRM was a great environment to be in. Because

although they have some connections to PETA, which I always hated, they really had an interesting set of agendas that were focused around questions of health policy and diet, so that was a space where I was able to explore how animal questions are related to questions of human inequalities and violences. And even though it was focused on the national context of the U.S., later on I was able to think more broadly about how that connected to other countries like India, and many countries around the world that had been ravaged by the “Washington Consensus” neoliberal attacks on their trade barriers and their agricultural subsidies. All of this is something I was starting to think about at the same time, and by the time I was a junior and a senior in college, I ended up moving on to starting other types of activist organizations. One was a labor rights organization; it was focused on international labor questions and neoliberalism. The critique of neoliberalism became really significant there; to me it seems to be very related to what was going on with agriculture subsidies, what was going on with the transnationalization of manufacturing labor that we were focusing on. Those were some beginnings, and then in graduate school I had the opportunity to read broadly in anti-colonial theory and postcolonial studies; it was there that I really built a global perspective on these questions. But for me they were always questions about political organizing, as well as being broad ethical questions. These were always questions that came up in the process of political organizing for various liberation movements.

VM: Can you discuss if and how your writing about animals and other life forms has shaped your dietary practices or vice versa, or, more generally, the relationship—if any—between writing and eating?

NA: Most of my writing on species concerns primates and vivisection, and I’m only more recently writing more about eating, and animals as food—although it has come up in some writings so far. I do think that in the whole history of my activism, thinking about food was an important entry point into broader political struggles for me. I’m not sure that starting to write about animals has really fed into my dietary practices so much—it’s remained pretty constant since I was a teenager. I guess I’m not really sure about that. But I certainly think that thinking critically about human–animal relations, and my work in the animal rights movement, and my becoming a vegan, certainly had something to do with why I pursued how postcolonial studies could think further about the question of animals, the question of environment. But I’m not sure

that the actual act and practice of writing has shaped my eating, necessarily.

VM: That makes sense. We haven’t interviewed many longtime vegans. We’ve heard very different answers to these questions, and even within the group of researchers writing this book, we’re still grappling with our eating practices in some ways. It’s unique to hear a response from someone who’s had a relatively consistent approach to their own diet.

NA: Yes, I think the only struggle I have with eating now is that since I’ve become an academic, everybody seems to want to talk about wine and stuff.

SK: You find people talk too much about wine?

NA: Yes!

SK: Right, and the bourgeois preoccupation with what we’re putting in our body, and where we’re sourcing it, and all the localism stuff. . . . I’ve noticed those topics take up more and more conversational space.

NA: As someone who’s really committed to working in public institutions, I really think it’s weird that it’s kind of standard practice for academics to spend huge amounts of money on fancy meals when doing job interviews. It’s very strange to me. I really think that public funds should be spent in a responsible manner.

SK: We do some of that in Canada, but we’re not usually permitted to spend money on alcohol.

NA: Right. And in California, that was also really different. I still am living in North Carolina but I’m about to start at Santa Cruz, and I don’t think they allow alcohol to be purchased during these types of events.

VM: Can you tell us a story about a time when your dietary practices have been a subject of awkwardness, celebration, or hostility? I’m particularly interested in what it was like for you on the job market, doing campus visits. Has anything memorable happened? Did you feel you were performing your own veganism, or has it been a subject of interest or curiosity?

NA: Yes. Before I give a talk, or do a campus visit, interview, or any kind of invited event, I always bring up the fact that I’m vegan. I’m not someone who otherwise cares too much about what food I eat, so I’ll just

eat anything available that's vegan. But in some instances your hosts will take you to places with limited options. This was probably the case when I came to interview here at Chapel Hill in North Carolina. I remember when we were eating at restaurants during the interviews, there wasn't much that I could order. But I expected that going in. . . . Anyway, advice to grad students who are vegan and interviewing: Just eat before you go out. Both because you may not have anything to eat when you go out for your interview meals, but also because those are really *interviews*. Those aren't really meals, and you need to focus on the conversation. I found it was advantageous to already be full when walking in to the lunch, where eight people were interviewing me. Those weren't super awkward for me.

What might be a more useful story is from when I was in college. I lived in an intentional community: a housing cooperative with an explicit social justice and environmental justice mission. And for three years I was the food manager there, as one of the vegans who lived in the house. There were other vegans, but it was a vegetarian cooperative, mostly vegan, and I coordinated all our shopping and organized all the meal planning to ensure it was primarily vegan. When people who were cooking for the co-op wanted me to buy an egg ingredient and I basically told them "No," those were definitely awkward experiences. I think this is a really interesting difference between the United States and India to think about: In India egg is often considered a nonvegetarian food, and in the U.S. it's considered vegetarian. This was a subject of total confusion repeatedly in our discussions. For me, it had something to do with knowing about the specific factory-farming practices around chickens and eggs, but I think because of the way people draw up these categories of what's "meat" and what's not meat—why isn't milk meat? Does it have something to do with the solid form of the object as opposed to its being a liquid? What's the difference between different types of animal products and how you categorize them? That can lead to all kinds of confusion and awkward experiences. I have friends who are vegetarian and vegan who work in China, and they talked about how, yeah, you can get vegetarian food, but pig is not necessarily understood to be meat. And they have to explain how that particular animal needs to be singled out when ordering. The same thing happens in other countries with fish being meat or not meat. I think that's always something that provokes awkward interactions.

SK: One of the things we're hoping to do is think about connections between interviews. Do you know Naisargi Dave? She's an anthropologist

at the University of Toronto who is writing a book called *The Social Skin: Animal Rights in India*; her previous book was on queer activism in India.

NA: I haven't met her, but I've read her work.

SK: She also brought up Hindu nationalism and the place of the cow therein. She does her research in India, so that's different, but she talked about what it's like to go back there; she's also a vegan. And one thing that stood out for me in her interview was when she talked about having meals with her cosmopolitan leftist friends in India, and how because of the articulation of vegetarianism to Islamophobia in the present moment, there's an emerging solidarity in which people are eating meat to express their opposition to Hindu nationalism. Because you brought this up earlier, I'm wondering if you are able to elaborate on any of those things. I was particularly struck by the fact you said that most or all of your family in India now eat meat. Assuming you go back there, what might that be like? Also, is there anything you want to add about the relationship of vegetarianism to Hindu nationalism in the present moment?

NA: Sure. I think we're witnessing a really crucial time for thinking about the connection of vegetarianism in India with a regressive politics that's now bordering on fascism. I was really disappointed to see that the Indian iteration of the Minding Animals conference—the largest international animal studies conference—invited Maneka Gandhi from the right-wing BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] as a keynote speaker, given the outright violence that's being meted out against Muslims, who are often not actually slaughtering for meat but are accused of doing so, and are lynched. This is going on right now in several states in India. I can't speak so much to how to think about whether eating meat could thus be a form of solidarity with Muslims and Christians among people on the left. It is a fascinating tactic and speaks to a real attempt at solidarity. I think it also might have its own limitations. If I'm thinking of veganism as being tactical in a specific context, could meat eating be a tactical political statement in another context? Yes, but I'm not yet sure how that works in a broader time frame, given the rise in India's meat consumption. India is still the lowest per capita consumer of meat in the world, but it's growing really fast. And it's growing in part because of the economic liberalization begun by the Congress Party, and now being extended in really unequal ways by the BJP. Meat eating is growing for the elites and the upper middle class, particularly those who have access to a certain amount of transnational capital that's rolling into India. It's become a

status symbol even as cow meat is singled out as anti-national. Nonetheless, I understand why symbolically some people are thinking along those lines and feeling it's important for people to create space where those dietary practices don't become a point of stigma.

But I think—especially given India's role in climate change and what it would mean to justly feed such a large and growing population—I think there needs to be a much more radical reimagining of food and relationships to land. And particularly the pro-corporate policies that are expanding India's meat export industry under the current government. Even though they promote vegetarianism at home as a kind of spiritual cleansing, India has been turned into an exporter of meat and leather. Are these industries that are conducive to an environmentally and socially sustainable future for India? That seems very questionable to me, so I don't know how it would work to try and integrate vegetarianism into a really aggressive left politics in India given the right-wing history of cow protection.

I think distinguishing cow protection from the broader question of species is one way this is kind of valid. There are distinctions: Animal rights, animal liberation, and veganism are not exactly the same thing as the domestic cow-protection movement, so how do we talk about that difference? Is that something that can be used to explore a new kind of future for maintaining what's necessarily going to be low meat consumption if we're going to address climate change? I think those are potentially important starting points.

VM: Thank you so much. A big part of why we're doing this project is to explore the role of emotions in scholarship. We're interested in better understanding the ways in which our academic interests draw focus in our daily lives and resonate not only logistically and politically but also emotionally. We've discussed among ourselves as a research group what it means for us to inhabit the role of the vegan or vegetarian "killjoy" and what an awareness of various types of violence entails for us. So my question is, given the wide scope of assemblages that you examine—for example, in *Bioinsecurities*, ranging from these large-scale political economies to the microscopic organism—do you not see violence and imperialism inscribed everywhere you look? And if so, how do you negotiate that?

NA: So, how is it possible to live and act in a world that seems suffused with violence?

VM: Yes, how do you carry that? How do you avoid drowning with it?

NA: I think that's why activism and the political work we do inside and outside the academy feels—at some points—like the only life-sustaining activity we do. For me, we can think about veganism as set of ethical practices, but it's also a set of community-building practices. We may be vegan killjoys in some moments, but then there is a whole set of practices that develop around food preparation that I never would have engaged with otherwise. I wouldn't have learned how to cook had I not turned vegan at age seventeen and needed to figure that out. So there are people who, since I spent years at some point in my life cooking with them, whenever we visit each other now that becomes part of our experience.

Our political activism is also informed by food practices. One thing we did as animal activists in college was work with Food Not Bombs, to actually feed other activists in other movements, literally during the protests, and also to feed people who were food-insecure in the community. So thinking about veganism as a political tactic rather than an ethical universal helps us think through how it can be part of anti-colonial tactics as well, the tactics that work to imagine other ecological futures even as we witness this giant extinction event that we live in.

That said, the things that you love always have to be subjected to critique, so that can feel depressing. It can be hard to be the killjoy of vegan killjoys, but asking the hard questions is important: Would it be more sustainable for us to be eating insects rather than eating cultivated soy? Would it ultimately result in less species extinction through climate change to eat the most efficient protein—which is probably insects? I have this obsession with insects. I think it's important to ask the hard questions and not to abandon critique in the face of these crises. So emotionally, yeah, it's hard sometimes. But these are also potential sites of world building, and for reinstituting futures that could have been had not colonial modernity put its grasp upon humans as laborers and animals as nature.