

INTRODUCTION. What Is Indifference?

I am not, I like to think, an indifferent person, and nor is this an indifferent book. By *indifference* I mean living with others in their otherness such that human and nonhuman animals might flourish in immanent encounters. Indifference to difference is an indifference to the thatness of others: not acquiring, not desiring, not in thrall, not hankering, not assimilating, not repairing, not consuming, not anthropologizing, not staring.¹ Indifference is the posture of immersion, side by side, rather than the face to face.²

Indifference is not normally thought of highly. As Madhavi Menon says, it conjures images of slouchy shrugs among other signs of self-centered apathy.³ Yet these impressions are often tinged with a revealing envy for the insouciance of youth or, worse, racist, elitist, and ableist disdain for people going about their own business. In both my understanding of indifference and in Menon's, as she argues it in *Indifference to Difference: On Queer Universalism*, indifference is not a lack but a stance, a cultivated demeanor, that is born of the queer desire and the queer belief in an otherwise way of being.⁴

Let's be honest. There is no shortage of the opposite of indifference in our world, which is the desire for difference—finding, wrangling, and utilizing it. And where has this gotten us? Anthropology? Heterosexuality? Capitalism? Empire? Friends, I think we can do better.

1 Lauren Berlant is on the side of “beloved thatness,” which they argue is a social principle different from love normatively constituted, if love too often seeks to hold, to have, and to forge. Thatness, Berlant says, makes space for a vision of the “impersonal world.” Berlant, “A Properly Political Concept of Love,” 690.

2 Tonkiss, “The Ethics of Indifference,” 298.

3 Menon, *Indifference to Difference*, 14.

4 “Indifference,” Menon writes, “argues for a radical break with the identity that undergirds liberal and conservative politics alike”: Menon, *Indifference to Difference*, 2.

For Opacity

Curiosity is a trait often held in high regard, particularly among intellectuals, with its opposite—being incurious—viewed as a sign of dereliction. It must be twenty years now since I read an essay about Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, which argued that we know Humbert Humbert is a sociopath when he comes upon a glass cabinet of mounted butterflies and fails to examine it.⁵ I was troubled by this claim. Besides having to now wonder whether I might be a sociopath—an always unwelcome interpellation—I wondered at this premise that one's goodness is demonstrated by an interest in pinned butterfly carcasses. It is not Humbert I am trying to redeem (I confess I've never managed to appreciate *Lolita*) but it is incuriosity.

Curiosity is the foundation of anthropology, so fundamental that it is our common sense—normalized, not subject to much comment. But it has been a more explicitly valued disposition in multispecies anthropology, attributable, I think, to the field-defining work of Donna Haraway. Like any thinker to whom one is indebted, Haraway provides both departure points and homes in which one would like to dwell. This matter, regarding curiosity, is for me one of the points of divergence.

Haraway begins *When Species Meet* (2008) on a walk in the forest with her canine friend, Cayenne Pepper, and the anthropologist James (Jim) Clifford. There the threesome come upon an organic mass of moss and wood they call “Jim’s dog.” Haraway writes, “Jim’s dog is a provocation to curiosity, which I regard as one of the first obligations and deepest pleasures of worldly companion species.”⁶ This commitment to curiosity leads Haraway to a vigorous undressing of the already naked Jacques Derrida, on the grounds that his unrobed shame before his cat spurs him into a philosophical reflection on the misogynistic, homophobic, carnivorous, ableist, and anthropocentric essence of Man rather than a curiosity about what this specific cat was thinking and whether she might want to play.⁷ “Shame,” Haraway writes, “trumped curiosity.”⁸ I find this either/or hierarchizing curious from the author of “A Cyborg Manifesto,”

5 Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 25; Nabokov, *Lolita*.

6 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 7.

7 Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 1–51. The central situation of this foundational text in animal studies is Derrida's “little cat” following him into the bathroom, believing this a momentary stop on the way to the kitchen, only to find him fully, frontally naked for his morning ablutions. The philosopher “follows” this experience, this mutual embarrassment, to the end(s) of anthropocentrism.

8 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 22.

which professed, “One is too few, but two are too many.”⁹ Curiosity about the specific One is more vital than being stopped short in the face of one’s unearned and illegitimate power? Are these states of being really at odds?

One answer to the last question is *yes*, but maybe not in the way Haraway intended. I think curiosity often functions to stop short the stopping short that *should* be the lot of those who look, stare, take in, pillage, acquire, ingest, dissect, admire, anthropologize, steal, exhibit, repair, voice, recoil, sell, and possess. Haraway suggests that, rather than stopping short, we do better by going forth, forming “knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other.”¹⁰ A central precept of multispecies ethnography is this: that we be curious, that we look, and that we accept that being a being in this entangled world means being eaten by one another. Eyes and mouth, fist and heart.

When I read this text most recently—it is one of those books always on or near my desk—I had just that morning listened to a talk by Fred Moten. Moten describes how, in his childhood neighborhood, there were no fighting words quite like “What are you looking at? Are you looking at me?”¹¹ And I was reminded of Milan Kundera, who writes in *Immortality* that “looks were like weights that pressed her down to the ground. . . . [E]very day we are stabbed by thousands of looks.”¹² This is not unrelated to John Berger’s thesis in *Ways of Seeing* that these stabs that are looks are why women are nude, rarely naked, as was Derrida’s privilege as he toweled and philosophized.¹³ I think, too, of a moment Audre Lorde relates in *Sister Outsider*, in which she is stared at, in her inexpensive winter coat, by a white woman on a train and Lorde feels the recoil, the otherness, the whiteness of curiosity.¹⁴ I can say for myself that, as a dyke, the curious gaze of normal people is rarely a pleasure. *Are you looking at me?* Shouldn’t we at least have a say in who eats us?

An alternative to the curiosity ethos is provided by the Martinican French poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant issues a demand for opacity: *We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone*.¹⁵ Glissant contrasts opacity with the driver of Western thought: the requirement for

9 Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 143.

10 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 42.

11 Fred Moten, *Poetry Reading*, University of Toronto (video, University of Toronto, posted April 5, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ka37oU3O2Us>.

12 Kundera, *Immortality*, 30.

13 John Berger, “Episode 2,” *Ways of Seeing*, television series, BBC Two, 1972.

14 Lorde, “Eye to Eye,” 147–48.

15 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 194.

transparency, an epistemological and moral motivation that manifests through grasping and reduction, conquest and ingestion (I'm reminded of that glass case in Nabokov).¹⁶ Glissant refuses this requirement for transparency, refuses to be on the side of the knower or the known, knowing both to be relations of taking rather than “giving on and with” (*donner-avec*).¹⁷ He feels it so violently that he says it twice in the span of a few pages: “As for my identity, I'll take care of that myself.”¹⁸ Autological thought might read this autologically, which is to say, as an insistence on an essential molar lonesomeness. But that would be to misread Glissant. “The right to opacity,” he writes, “would not establish [autology]: it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedom.”¹⁹ The foundation of Relation lies not in the dubious right to gaze-available difference but in the exercise and respect of singular opacities.

I think it's telling that Glissant ends this brief section of *Poetics of Relation*, “For Opacity,” with the opaque story of the fin de siècle French ethnographer Victor Segalen, who died mysteriously in the Breton woods with an open copy of *Hamlet* lying next to his body. Glissant's thesis is that the ethnographer died of curiosity—or, to put it differently, “died of the opacity of the Other, of coming face to face with the impossibility of accomplishing the transmutation that he dreamed of.”²⁰ If only Segalen had known that “respect for mutual forms of opacity”—not the ethnological desire for difference—would have been the true realization of his ethical generosity!²¹ But now we see this Glissantian respect for mutual forms of opacity, this clamor for the right to it, increasingly in the turn of this latest century in anthropology and the arts. Perhaps fewer of us are dying of—or more to the point, being picked off by—curiosity.²²

The clamor for opacity sounds in the work of the abstract expressionist, Julie Mehretu, a queer Ethiopian-born artist whose refusals of figuration are

16 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

17 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191–92.

18 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191–92. In the second instance Glissant phrases it, “As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself.”

19 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

20 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 193.

21 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 194.

22 There is curiosity, and there is what we do with curiosity, the ends to which we pursue ours and the rights we believe it bestows. I thank Celeste Pang, who put the curiosity I am arguing against this way: “Lest I extinguish the other, I am extinguished.” Segalen, whose extinguishing (transmutation) of the other was thwarted, was himself extinguished.

a direct homage to Glissant.²³ The clamor animates Audra Simpson’s ethnographic refusals.²⁴ It is in Savannah Shange’s Black girl methodology in which “you can follow me but I’m not gonna talk to you.”²⁵ It is in Julieta Singh’s unthinking mastery.²⁶ It is in John Jackson’s thin and not thick description.²⁷ It is in Eva Giraud’s rejoinder to Haraway, an ethic not of entanglement, but of exclusion or nonrelation—of at least *sometimes* just leaving folks alone.²⁸ It is in Denise Riles’s right to be lonely; in Fran Tonkiss’s right to the “precarious freedom . . . of the fragile trust in the indifference of others”; in Georg Simmel’s mutual strangeness; in Paul B. Preciado’s ephemeral brush in his trans man’s body with universality, a “peaceful and anonymous place where everyone leaves you the fuck alone.”²⁹ *As for my identity, I’ll take care of that myself.* It is in Matei Candea’s inter-patience, “an active cultivation of inaction.”³⁰ Imagining life from the perspective of a lab-bound meerkat, Candea suggests, “ignoring another living being . . . emerges as a positive achievement in a world of predation.”³¹ It hums, too, in Audre Lorde’s love poem “For Judith”:

Hanging out
means being
together
upon the earth
boulders
crape myrtle trees
fox and deer
at the watering hole
not quite together
but learning
each other’s ways.³²

23 See Patterson-West, “Julie Mehretu.”

24 Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal.”

25 Shange, “Black Girl Ordinary,” 15.

26 Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*.

27 Jackson, *Thin Description*, 158.

28 Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement?*

29 Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 36; Riley, “The Right to Be Lonely”; Simmel, “The Stranger”; Tonkiss, “The Ethics of Indifference.”

30 Candea, “I Fell in Love with Carlos the Meerkat,” 249.

31 Candea, “I Fell in Love with Carlos the Meerkat,” 249.

32 “For Judith,” in Lorde, *Our Dead behind Us*, 42.

There is a curiosity here, yes, an awareness of other others who pose risk and promise, or maybe simply beauty. We might call this being together not quite together in our beloved thatnesses a relation of unfolding immanence.

Indifference is not, as Glissant says for opacity, the antithesis of relationality or the antithesis to relations of care. In fact, it is among the central beliefs of this book that care is born first of indifference, out of respect for the opaque thatness of the object other. The ethos of indifference—a not desiring *to do anything* with, for, and via the difference of others—is, for me, a response to what I think of as “compulsory intimacy,” or the will toward ontological slippage, which makes a (post)humanist virtue of mixing when folks might rather be let alone and, in that being let alone, thrive in relations of regard.³³ My understanding of indifference is Relational: of mutually existing *in difference* rather than being different beings seeking to grasp, gaze, admire, and master the difference of others.³⁴ This book is about the praxis of being that exists

33 I am thinking here with Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s *Becoming Human*. Jackson analyzes the raciality that is at the heart of the human-animal distinction, a plastic raciality whose object is the abjection of all that is counter to whiteness. Jackson diagnoses in this will to plasticity what she calls an “ontological slippage,” which operates not only, in the case of white supremacy, as a negating slippage among Blackness, femaleness, and animality *but now, too*, in the case of multispecies and posthumanist scholarship, as a celebratory slippage between human and animal that finds ethical promise in entanglement, analogy, and mixture: see Jackson, *Becoming Human*. See also Emily K. Crandall, “Interview: Zakiyyah Iman Jackson on *Becoming Human*,” *Always Already Podcast* (July 20, 2020), in which Jackson says: “I wanted to push back against post-humanist notions that ontological slippage was . . . somehow ethical, in and of itself, because in looking at the history of Blackness, ontological slippage was less an ethical promise and something more like a racial nightmare” (<https://alwaysreadypodcast.wordpress.com/2020/07/02/jackson/>). I’m reminded here of something Aniket Jaaware writes in his anti-caste literary manifesto: “We are not seeking ‘humanity.’ We are seeking an animality that lets be”: Jaaware and Rao, *Practicing Caste*, 200.

34 This formulation of indifference as a *residing in difference* is indebted to Madhavi Menon, as well as to Gilles Deleuze. Menon writes, “Indifference . . . names an anti-ontological state of being that would acknowledge and embody difference without becoming that difference”: Menon, *Indifference to Difference*, 2. Indifference as *being in difference* comes, too, from Deleuze’s ontology of difference in *Difference and Repetition*. Deleuze makes a conceptual distinction between vernacular difference (difference in the everyday parlance of identity society) and *difference*. The former understands identity as primary and difference as secondary, manifesting as particular qualities that depart from the Same. *Difference*, according to his ontology of difference, is immersive. We live in difference, *are* difference, and this difference

there at the watering hole, one of awareness of, and response to, the presences of opaque others. In that, *Indifference* argues for an interspecies relational ethic premised on mutual regard rather than curiosity, love, or animus.

For Janine

I was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, the elder child of Gujarati parents of the Nagar Brahmin caste. My father's father, Jaymukh, was a customs officer of stern disposition who, with his wife, Nalini, and three youngest children, moved around the country as his posts were assigned. My father was left back in Ahmedabad, raised by aunts and uncles in the caste *pol* where he was born. My mother's father, Rustom Munshi, was a liberal judge, and her mother, Suvarna (née Majmudar), a poet. They, too, moved often for Rustombhai's postings, including a long residence in Bhopal, but lived primarily in the Navarangpura area of Ahmedabad in a bungalow called Nisarg.

Left largely to his own devices, my father hatched a plan to go to America. He was accepted at Ohio State and informed his parents weeks before he departed. An uncle lent him money, and with the proverbial ten dollars in his pocket he set sail. He worked nights as a bellhop at the Columbus Sheraton and went on to earn an MBA at the University of Missouri. Toward the end of his program, he returned to Ahmedabad to be engaged to my mother, an arranged marriage, though she had been permitted by her doting father to refuse twenty-four suitors prior. By the time she joined my father, he was employed in Atlanta. He worked as a suit salesman at the mall. My mom, despite her beginner's English, sold cosmetics door to door for Avon. I was born in 1975; my brother, Prerak, four years later.

What my household was doctrinaire about was patriarchy; less so religion. My paternal grandmother was observant. We converted the modest wet bar off the kitchen of our suburban home into a *mandir* for her, and her early morning ritual self-flagellations served as my alarm clock. As for my father, when he was in the Ozarks he had gotten in with some Christians who took him to a Billy Graham rally. Something changed in him that day. In his briefcase he carried no images of us, nor of Krishna, but of a blue-eyed Jesus. Every night before sleeping, after completing our academic competence quizzes, he had

constitutes the Spinozan univocality of existence. Indifference to difference, or *being in difference*, is being indifferent to vernacular difference (the one premised on the primacy of the Same) and immersed instead in a difference that is in perpetual expression. This difference cannot be desired, for it simply is.

my brother and me recite the Lord's Prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.³⁵

We ate dairy-rich vegetarian, a diet shaped by caste distinction rather than ethics, until I was around ten. My father, by now an executive at Fannie Mae, I think felt emasculated at dinners with southern businessmen and began to eat meat, particularly steak, and to enjoy wine, beer, and whiskey. At first this liberal attitude toward meat was delimited by the threshold of the home: we could eat Chicken McNuggets and Burger King burgers so long as we didn't require my mother to prepare meat for us. But soon this edifice crumbled and my brother and I ate as many hotdogs as we could handle, my mom serving them up quite tastily and—because complaint was not an option in my father's house—without complaint.

I was destined to be a medical doctor from utero and, since I had no say in this, took aggressively little interest in my education. I enrolled at the University of Georgia, as many of the AP kids in my high school did, and rented an apartment with my best friend and her boyfriend. By October I was a lesbian, taking women's studies classes and developing tastes for everything foreign to my closeted upbringing, including, in no small measure, pork chops and bacon. In my third year in Athens, I moved into a rental house off Prince Avenue. One Saturday morning I looked out the living room window to see a sinewy, gorgeous androgyne in jeans and a tank top, a carabiner of keys clipped to her belt loop, mowing our front grass. Never in all my days had I seen a vision like this. I asked my roommate, Kate, and her poet friend, K. C., if they knew who she was. "Janine," K. C. said. And then, in that way of hers that made everything sound sexually suggestive: "She's a vegan." That evening, at our usual Huddle House hangout, I ordered dry toast and black coffee for dinner and have been vegan ever since.

I still am not certain whether I became vegan to be desired by Janine or to be Janine, but either way she never gave me the time of day. I don't believe we ever so much as had a conversation—maybe I managed a shy hello from my

35 A Hindu reverence for Jesus and Christianity is also not unusual. The Lord's Prayer was taught in English and in translation in many Indian schools as a vocation of imperial rule: see Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, 57–59. The titular character in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, for example, is taught the prayer through the *King George V Hindi Reader*. My father's family were also staunch Gandhians (my grandmother refused tea all her life), and Gandhi, as Parama Roy puts it, had a "heartfelt reverence for Christ and the New Testament": Roy, "Meat-Eating, Masculinity, and Renunciation in India," 66.

porch as she mowed the grass for my landlord. But the unreasoned decision that night at the Huddle House took. I read Carol J. Adams in a gender studies course; allowed myself to listen to ethical arguments for veganism in a way I wouldn't, or couldn't, when I ate meat; enjoyed the self-expressions that made me alien to my family; and came to speak, feel, and deeply identify with an ethics that rejects the use and abuse of animals, human and nonhuman all.

For a long time, I was too embarrassed to share this story about Janine, particularly with students who would ask in the context of animal studies courses how and when I became vegan. I felt it demonstrated a deficit of integrity, an excess of impressionability. But surely there are worse things than being impressed upon in this life! Particularly by an opaque object other who is minding her own business and asking nothing of you—sadly, nothing at all. But the reason I grew comfortable with this story is for its ability to demonstrate a central axiom in feminist, queer, Marxist, and antiracist traditions: that theory emerges from action. As with my dykeness I dove on in, chasing a feeling, an impression, a clamor: from affect, a world; from a hunch, a new way to see that world. Though Janine is a story about desire, Janine is also a story about indifference. Desire rendered me indifferent to what ordering dry toast and black coffee would mean for my identity, my future, my politics. So I suppose another thing I mean by *indifference* is getting out of our own way so that we are more free to respond to what moves us.³⁶ Indifference is, in this sense, an expansion and intensification of the capacity to affect and to be affected.³⁷ (A reader might rightly point out that I then proceed to narrow my own way by adopting an ideology. An excellent point. For what it's worth, I advocate inconsistency—indifference to sameness and difference—in most matters, the subject of chapter 3.)

But here is *not* why I'm telling the story of Janine: to suggest that my pan-species ethic of eating and not eating was born only of something queer and antipatriarchal, and not embedded in a caste inheritance. My ability to eat and experiment with meat and to capitalize on such practices rather than be punished, or worse, is an expression of Brahminism, as was my childhood vegetarianism and the distinctions it was thought to confer.³⁸ Tiffany Lethabo

36 I thank Jaya Sharma for this formulation.

37 I am grateful to Lisa Stevenson, who summarized one theme of this book as “I am indifferent to the call, therefore I answer the call.”

38 For readers less familiar with India and the ways in which caste and other minority oppression is grounded in the purity politics of vegetarianism and cow protection, I describe this landscape in chapter 1.

King writes in *The Black Shoals* that she and most of us scholars and artists and others “write to live with [ourselves],” not to *reconcile* but to voice our hauntings and make of them an inheritance that cares for the survival and thriving of those who live under relations of conquest in which we too are embedded, complicit.³⁹ This book cares for the survival and thriving of animal others and cares for the survival and thriving of those human persons, Dalits and Muslims and others, whose freedoms and lives have been stolen in the name of animal ethics, or casteist anti-meat movements, in India—the most vile kind of cynical politics that destroys everything it nears, including its own vacant soul. For King, the inheritance of care is bestowed on her by Black radical struggle. My inheritance is not radical. But I want for what I make to be.

This Book

This book is the result of years of research, writing, thinking, reading, and feeling about human-animal relations in India and elsewhere. I began fieldwork for this project in 2008, but funded and in earnest in 2011 for the next many years. I am methodical in most things, but in ethnography my method resonates more with the historian Susan Buck-Morss, who wrote in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* that “the idiosyncratic intuitions of the author provided the search engine” for her study.⁴⁰ I followed my intuitions; went where I was invited; and, in general, said yes to who and what turned up.⁴¹ The ethnographic material for this book draws from time in Banaras (Varanasi), Bangalore (Bengaluru), Bhopal, Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai), Dimapur, Goa, Haryana, Hyderabad, Jaipur, New Delhi, Pune, and Udaipur.⁴²

Each chapter presents an attempt to answer an ethical question about how humans and animals live and die in a shared world. Anthropology’s relationship to ethics has tended toward description of the ethical lives and moral systems of “others,” but I attempt here to treat ethnography, like literature, as insight into ethical questions that resonate beyond culture, species, or

39 King, *The Black Shoals*, xiii.

40 Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 10.

41 “Say yes to who and what turns up” is taken, with radical nongratitude, from Derida, *Of Hospitality*, 77.

42 In this book I tend to use the colonial names such as Bombay and Banaras, but not always consistently. Between the two hard places of Anglicization (or Portuguesization) and saffronization, I suppose I truck with the former, which has the slight advantage of longer familiarity.

periodization—even if their relevance and resonance surely have limits.⁴³ In both methodological and everyday praxis, I’m drawn toward actions that generate their own queer contexts rather than being shaped first by their frame. I say more about what I mean by this in chapter 3.

Each chapter deals with, and in, indifference—but differently, and with the case for indifference developing over the course of the book. Chapter 1, in which I spend time, in part, with past and present volunteers in animal shelters, demonstrates an intimate indifference to the species boundary of skin. The biographical chapter 2, which traces the lives of three women welfarists in India during the Second World War, pivots on an indifference to soap, which is also an indifference to the belonging-in-sameness that the attachment to difference ultimately produces. The indulgently argumentative chapter 3, sparked by one ethnographic scene and its many interpretations, argues for an indifference to consistency, resulting in a readiness to live *in difference*. Chapter 4, on a working cow and a working goat who each refuse, calls for an indifference to the difference between listening and saying. Chapter 5, a narrative interlude in which I go on a walk with an animal healer in Bombay, represents a love indifferent to the differentiations love so often demands. Chapter 6, on creaturely hands, interspecies touch, and how to conjure a lucky break, takes the theme of indifference on more centrally through the matter of indifference to dirt. The coauthored chapter 7, on interspecies touch of the bestial kind in India’s dairy farms and animal sterilization clinics, argues in part for an indifference to innocence. Chapter 8, in which I visit poultry farms to explore the industrial cultivation of carnal appetite, revolves around a chosen indifference to the far future, which means attention to all that we can bear. The chapters differ, too, in their degrees of abstraction versus ethnographic immersion, and where the latter is concerned, I do my best (and surely fail sometimes) to not be overly nosy—curious—toward anyone, human and animal alike. This is my offering for an anthropology after the fire, an anthropology at the watering hole,

*not quite together
but learning
each other’s ways.*⁴⁴

43 For an excellent review of the anthropology of ethics from the queer perspective of an affect alien, see Yo-Ling, “After Knowledge.”

44 “After the fire” refers to Jobson, “The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn.” The italicized lines are from “For Judith,” in Lorde, *Our Dead behind Us*, 42.