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Toward a Negative Zoology: (Not) Knowing More-than-Human Worlds

Chair: **Roberta Raffaetà**, University of Trento

Discussant
Fabio Vicini, University of Verona
Matteo Benussi, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

I take as my starting point Muhammad Asad's observation in The Message of the Quran that human sense-perception is limited, and that there must therefore be more-than-human worlds "beyond our ken." Drawing together contemporary ethological work on animals' sensory worlds and a 10th-century Islamic epistle on animals' capacities to worship the divine, I imagine possible worlds that nonhumans—dogs and ghosts, pigs and gods, cats and jinn—may be worlding without and unbeknownst to humans. Such not-knowing, I contend, decenters the secular fantasy of human mastery that underpins the Anthropocene. Riffing on the concept of negative theology, I argue for a kind of negative zoology, where the human is an onto-epistemological limit and the difference of the other—divine, animal—is unbridgeable, and I offer that limit as an ethical and political opportunity for a more-than-secular orientation to living and acting as humans.

Mayanthi Fernando is Professor of Anthropology at UC Santa Cruz. Her research interests include secularity; Islam; more-than-multispecies ecologies; histories of the body and consciousness; liberalism and law; and gender and sexuality. *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Duke, 2014) and co-editor of *Trouillot Remixed: The Michel-Rolph Trouillot Reader* (Duke, 2021). Her next monograph, *Companion Spirits: More-Than-Secular Journeys in More-Than-Human Worlds* will be out next March with Duke University Press.

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