

The Task of the Climate Translator

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Climate translations or stories must move between different registers to imaginatively engage with and express life in the Anthropocene. They must give visible form to the diverse climate imaginaries that proliferate in the world. These stories, however, remain unexamined. Following Walter Benjamin, translation is here conceptualised as a movement across domains wherein the translated version need not literally adhere to the original, but should rather aim to carry its echo. An instance of the form potential climate translations might assume is provided through an ethnographic account of human–animal relations in the Indian Himalaya. It compares and contrasts mainstream scientific accounts of animal endangerment/extinction and conflict to embedded but distinct Himalayan stories of multispecies relationality. These seemingly different accounts share a recognisably similar consciousness of human impact, inter-species entanglements, and climatic change.

The Anthropocene, borne of an acute awareness of anthropogenic climate change, poses foundational questions to knowledge-making practices.¹ It is forcing disciplines ranging from history (Chakraborty 2009) to anthropology (Latour 2014; Haraway 2015) to literature (Ghosh 2016) to rewrite their epistemological practices and reconsider their central assumptions as well as relevance to the world. Simultaneously, the entire apparatus of governance—from small non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to states to supra national conventions—are moving towards or considering new practices, policies, and treaties that can mitigate climate change. Clearly, a new form of dialogue is required between academia/research and systems of governance; domains which are all-too-often kept at a remove from one another. While, this divide—between academia/activism and policy/practice—is indeed an old one, climate change lends a new-found urgency to the endeavour to bridge it. This paper constitutes an attempt to reconcile their dual concerns through an exploration of a central challenge posed to both by climate change: the issue of translation and communication across different domains.

Climate change discourse remains, thus far, an expert and elite one (Beck 2010). This elitist expertise is a derivative not just of its almost total reliance on the natural sciences, but also its life in cosmopolitan languages, debates in expert journals, and discussions in legalistic, technocratic, and/or financialised terms in international spaces. Even though we are seeing diverse practices associated with climate change mitigation or security beginning to play out in more marginal spaces (that is, Cons 2017; Zeiderman 2016; Khan 2015), the conceptualisation of the problem—what it is; how it effects all humans; and how are we to deal with it—remains, to express through a word that harks back to early developmentalist discourse, top-down. The elitism of climate change remains, to my mind, one of the biggest hurdles in not just communicating and working together to combat it but, most critically, in even beginning to understand it. In a recently released documentary, the multi-species feminist scholar Donna Haraway, presses home the urgency of finding new stories for earthly survival (also see, Haraway 1984).² As she notes, the earth is already intensely storied, but we need to have the imagination to see them and the capacity to retell them even as we exercise caution in which stories get told and which do not. Furthermore, we need to recognise that seemingly scientific accounts are themselves derivatives of the stories we choose to tell about them. Biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction—central concerns of this paper and the wider book manuscript it draws from (Mathur forthcoming)—are “... primarily cultural issues,

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questions of what we value and what stories we tell, and only secondarily issues of science” (Heise 2016: 5).

Anthropologists are well-positioned to do the labour of storytelling and translating as they have meditated on the question of who is speaking for whom and are—or at least should be—trained to be conscious of power, voice, culture and history. Anthropologists have, for long, taken on the role of cultural translators or the go-in-betweens (Asad 1986).³ There is, of course, both a disturbing colonial history to the discipline of anthropology (Asad 1995) and anthropological authorship needs to be continually interrogated (Chua and Mathur forthcoming). However, I would argue that the imperatives of climate change justice positively make it incumbent on anthropologists/ethnographers to take on the task of relating hitherto unheard stories in and of the Anthropocene. As a recent work has argued,

[...] climate change is not just about hotter temperatures and melting ice. It is also about stories and images, myth and reality, knowledge and ignorance, humour and tragedy—questions that are, at root, cultural in nature. While this collision and confusion of forces flummox climate scientists and policy makes alike, in some ways they make it all the more attractive to the anthropological project. (Barnes and Dove 2015: 3)

In the emergent literature on climate change, anthropologists have focused on the social and cultural mediation of climate change science; shown local practices of adaptation; studied the processes of construction of expert knowledge on climate change; and are beginning to seriously wrestle with the question of climate justice even as they document the plight of climate refugees. In this burgeoning anthropology of climate change, I propose adding, after Walter Benjamin (1996), the task of the climate translator.

I begin with an explanation of what I mean by climate translation and why we require climate translators. The rest of the paper is devoted to my own initial attempt at climate translation. This climate translation is drawn from my long-term ethnographic work in Uttarakhand on human–big cat relations. I describe what appear, at first sight, to be distinct explanations for human–big cat conflict but then go on to argue that they all relate, in their own way, to climate change. How, I ask, might embedded narratives that do not directly name climate change, far less the Anthropocene, help us better understand and make sense of both? Elsewhere, I have traced the process whereby “climate change” marked an entry in the Uttarakhand in the context of human–animal conflict and species extinction through very localised processes of deduction and naming by the state (Mathur 2015). There my concern lay with tracing how the very category of climate change—based in the English language and derived from the rationalism of a universalised “science,” complex climate models and tables, and descriptions in reports published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—travelled out from its elite spaces and assumed an explanatory power in a remote, borderland of India. In this work, I take the analysis in a very different direction. This is partly compelled by a greater interest in the analytical potential of the Anthropocene, but mostly it

stems from a desire to make subaltern voices and alternate climate imaginaries more visible and meaningful in mainstream discussions of climate change.

I compare and contrast the narratives around reasons for human–big cat conflict that stem from the category of climate change with alternative narratives that sought to explain the very same phenomena without taking recourse to the expert discourse of climate change. The comparison is meant to make two broad points. First, we can see the non-climate change arguments are entirely feasible and may, in fact, be more accurate than the generic explanations of prey/habitat loss and human–animal competition over increasingly scarce resources. Second, I dwell on what we learn from these alternate narratives that are too often ignored or pejoratively dismissed. If we pay careful attention to these stories then we get glimpses of history, empire, the workings of capitalism and corporations, state power, racialised prejudices, and notions of justice/injustice. Both climate change and the Anthropocene share the problem of an excessive—if not sole—reliance on the knowledge of the natural sciences. Climate translations of the form I all-too-briefly attempt here can help challenge this hegemony of the natural sciences as well as the hierarchy whereby social sciences and humanities are always-and-forever placed below the natural sciences. It can also make us aware of alternate imaginations of what the effects of climate change are and what has caused it in the first place. I end by arguing that we need to pay equal attention to all sorts of stories so as to construct a richer, more layered imaginary of the Anthropocene—a new climate of imagination, so to say.

Climate Translation

Etymologically, translation “evokes an act of moving or carrying across from one place or position to another, or of changing from one state of things to another” (Buden et al 2009: 196). Benjamin (1996) in his seminal essay, “The Task of the Translator,” had made the point that this act of translation is not about literality or a fidelity to words. Rather, it is about capturing something of the essence of the original in the translation. As he describes it, it is about aiming an echo that resonates in some way with the original: “[...] aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one” (1996: 258–59). Following Benjamin, I propose the task of the climate translator lies in the transference of stories reflective of people’s relationships with the world across domains—such as that of science and myth or quotidian chatter and conservationist discourse—that are normally kept separate.

The task of the climate translator is important for several reasons. First, it is important to challenge the arrogance of much (Eurocentric) climate science that assumes there is only one modality—through the supposedly rationalised work of legitimised science—that can illuminate the crisis that faces humanity. While I do not dispute the importance of climate science, I do wish to contest the fact that knowledge of the world we inhabit remains its sole preserve. Surely, the people who are most vulnerable to global warming have their own

readings and narrations of import? As the climate scientist Mike Hulme has put it, “[t]here is no one story to tell about climate change” (2015: 298). To tell other stories about climate change we need to more boldly take on the role of “climate translators.” Beyond challenging the hegemony of climate science, climate translations remain important for three other inter-related reasons. For one, climate translations are important to confront climate skeptics, denialists, and conspiracists who continue to dispute the facticity of climate change. We need to collate all forms of knowledge and as many stories as we can in order to establish the reality of climate change, and overrule those who refuse to believe in it or act with the required energy. Perhaps most importantly, climate translations are required so as to enable a better understanding of what climate change is actually about and what is at stake for the planet. In the process, and finally, climate translations can help overcome some of the problems intrinsic to the concept of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene and Its Discontents

The Anthropocene has burst onto the scene with, as Howe and Pandian (2016) put it, “an astonishing speed, dislodging familiar terms like nature and environment from their customary pre-eminence as signs of the world beyond ourselves.” Powerful as the concept is, there exist some trenchant criticisms of it. For instance, Jason Moore (2015: 170) has argued:

The Anthropocene makes for an easy story. Easy because it does not challenge the naturalised inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production. It is an easy story to tell because it does not ask us to think about these relations at all. The mosaic of human activity in the web of life is reduced to an abstract Humanity: a homogenous acting unit. Inequality, commodification, imperialism, patriarchy, racial formations, and much more, have been largely removed from consideration. At best, these relations are acknowledged, but as after-the-fact supplements to the framing of the problem.

Similarly, Malm and Hornborg (2014) have demonstrated how the concept of the Anthropocene is ultimately dominated by the natural sciences and the dangers it holds of underplaying the deep divisions between the human species in time and space as well as making issues of culture and power secondary. It is precisely these unequal relations of power and privilege that have been central not just to what international climate negotiations describe as differentiated responsibilities, but they will also continue to play out in the highly unequal impact of climate change and of subsequent coping capacities. In contrast to many others who are proclaiming the capacity of the Anthropocene to make us engage with the political moment of the day, Malm and Hornborg (2014: 67) convincingly argue that the Anthropocene narrative is not just “analytically defective” but also “inimical to action.”

It is for this reason, alternatives to the Anthropocene have been proposed such as the “Capitalocene” that has been proposed independently by both Andreas Malm and Donna Haraway. Capitalocene will centre not on the “anthropos” as an undifferentiated whole but the working of capitalism that, in essence, can be seen as the culprit of anthropogenic climate

change as outlined in Naomi Klein’s (2014) polemic *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate*.

I am not as interested in the different names that can capture the current epoch inhabited by all of humanity, as much as I am in devising a more nuanced framing for the concept of the Anthropocene. My previous (Mathur 2015) criticism of the Anthropocene has stemmed from the fact that it fails to duly acknowledge the lack of culpability in the present predicament of my long-term interlocutors in the Himalaya, even as it seems to ignore the fact that they will be the first and the most precariously positioned to combat its effects. But what if we were to listen more carefully and seriously to what residents of the Indian Himalaya have to say; the stories they tell us, and translate them back into an understanding of the actually-existing-living-breathing-dying Anthropocene in the Himalaya? In other words, perhaps we can enrich the very conceptualisation of the Anthropocene by grounding it in the Himalaya and moving it away from simply a geological category to one that is capable of reflecting marginalised voices? Such a reconceptualisation is critical for, to quote Moore (2015: 169) again, “[...] conceptualizations of a problem and efforts to resolve that problem are always tightly connected. So, too, are the ways we think about the origins of a problem and how we think through possible solutions.”

In what follows, I outline how increasing conflict with big cats in the Himalaya is being discussed in the context of climate change. As I have previously noted, this causality—between human–animal conflict—is but a recent phenomenon (Mathur 2015, 2016b). Alongside an explanation rooted in climate change exists accounts that seem—at first glance—entirely removed not just from climate change accounts, but also reality altogether. Acting as a climate translator, I suggest that not only do these alternative explanations fall within the realm of possibility and might be correct explanations but also, if translated with care, they can serve to bring out the analytic potential inherent in the Anthropocene. Distinct as the diverse stories might appear, is it possible to tease out any shared beliefs or politics between them? Through a closer focus on the alternative to climate change theories that account for human–animal conflict, I suggest that they should be read as expressive comments on historical-political injustices and anthropogenic ecological damage. If we take seriously the concept of the Anthropocene and consider climate change in its entanglement with the excesses of capitalism, the entrenchment of sociopolitical inequalities, and an outfall of colonial plunder, then these stories can be seen to possess a family resemblance to climate change narratives.

Human–Big Cat Conflict in the Himalaya

The phenomenon of man-eating leopards and tigers has a long history in Uttarakhand. In some of the earliest available statistics, the Garhwal Gazetteer, which records deaths caused by tigers and leopards in the 19th century notes:

[f]rom a return of inquests held in Garhwal between 1850 and 1863, the number of deaths from the attacks of wild animals was recorded at 276 during that period, and ₹13,784 were paid as rewards for the

destruction of 91 tigers, 1,300 leopards and 2,602 bears. Taking the decade 1870–79, the returns show that 211 persons (123 males) were killed by wild animals and ₹9,317 were paid as rewards for destroying 62 tigers, 905 leopards and 1,740 bears. (Atkinson 1888: 15)

Crucially, the Gazetteer admits “[t]his return is avowedly imperfect, as it only includes the deaths reported to the authorities and the animals killed for which rewards have been claimed” (Atkinson 1888: 16). Presently too the construction of state statistics remains unreliable for a variety of reasons, including under-reporting of incidences, especially when they occur in distant mountain villages, the painfully convoluted documentary regimes associated with the production of state statistics in India, and the flat refusal of officials to accept certain cases as such a recognition would lead to claims of monetary compensation from the state (Mathur 2016a). What this results in is the generation of watered down statistics, something that officials readily acknowledged when off the record. Over the years I spent in a small town in Garhwal, for instance, there were only three deaths by a man-eating leopard that were officially declared even though unofficially there was talk of at least nine deaths and many more injuries, some of which were grievous. According to the latest official reports from Uttarakhand “over 200” humans were killed by man-eating tigers and leopards over 2000–15 and 140 big cats (leopards and tigers) were officially declared man-eaters in the same period (Upadhyay 2016).

Statistics on deaths aside, there are constant speculation in all quarters on the reason/s why big cats become man-eaters in the first place. This is not a new occurrence with the colonial Gazetteer describing the hill tiger as a “quarrelsome creature” and the leopard as “very common all over the hills and in parts very destructive” (Atkinson 1888: 16). It does not, however, specify the reasons for this destructive nature of the leopard. Generally, it is believed that big cats turn on humans—an otherwise alien prey—when they are unable to hunt their “normal” food due to old age or injuries. Indeed, this has been the standard explanation for man-eaters for the longest time amongst colonial and postcolonial officials as well as big cat conservationists. From individual, physiological traits like an injury or old age, the narrative has, in the recent past, shifted to the global level with the blame put at the door of climate change.

Climate Change and Human–Animal Conflict

Climate change is now widely acknowledged to be a prime driver behind species extinction. While there is a wide variation on the risks of extinction by climate change, a recent synthesis of published studies argues that if climate changes proceed as expected, one in six species could face extinction (Urban 2015). But why, specifically, does climate change lead to extinction is being debated. Instead of limited tolerance to high temperatures, another study, argues that it is species interactions, especially decrease in food availability, that is really driving extinction (Cahill et al 2012). The decrease in food availability, that is becoming marked, due to habitat loss and biodiversity depletion is driving changes in species range

as animals travel further and further in search for nourishment. These are the precise reasons that are being provided for increased human–animal conflict as contests over land and resources ensue between the two. The World Wildlife Fund (nd) tells the story as a direct conflict between increasing populations of humans and their livestock and a decreasing number of vulnerable big cats. In the conservationist literature, the blame is squarely put on humans: their numbers, encroachment on animal-land, competition over same resources, and violence towards animals in the form of hunting or poaching.

Much of the language and thinking on climate change and increased human–big cat conflict has been adopted in the Himalaya as well. Human–big cat conflicts—ranging from minor attacks to full-fledged man-eating—are more and more being linked to climate change. The argument, in brief, goes that previously there was abundant prey available for big cats (that is, sheep, goats, deer, and so on). However, due to resource degradation and biodiversity depletion, big cats now find themselves faced with sparse options for hunting out their regular prey and are, thus, constrained to turn on humans. In Uttarakhand, in conversations with me, in meetings as well as in official explanations to disgruntled citizens, state officials expressly made a connection between “climate change” and human–big cat conflict. Such causality is being established not just in Uttarakhand but, more globally, any form of human–animal conflict is now considered to be a derivative of climate change. This intimate causality between climate change and increased human–animal conflict is especially true of the conservationist literature.

Not just conservationist organisations but also academic work on climate change and the Anthropocene is assuming the very same co-relation: human–animal conflict as well as animal–animal conflict is a directly observable effect of climate change. Sample this sentence from the historian Dipesh Chakraborty, who has written some widely-circulated essays on the subject:

There is the widely accepted point that humans have been putting pressure on other species for quite some time now; I do not need to belabor it. Indeed, the war among animals such as rhinoceroses, elephants, monkeys, and big cats may be seen every day in many Indian cities and villages. (2014: 13)

The “war among animals” and its link to climate change and human population pressure—the reasons cited by Chakraborty—is now becoming commonsensical, but until the past decade this was not the case. A rich wildlife and environmental history of South Asia has shown human–animal conflict, animal “wars,” as well as species extinction can be traced far back in time and are driven by a range of factors of which human population pressure is not necessarily an important one (Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan 2011). I am not as much questioning the causality, as I am spelling it out to make the point that this self-evidentiary quality is but a recent occurrence. A rising number of articles in the international media on human–animal conflict similarly rely on the trope of climate change.⁴ In the context of *adamkhor bagh* (human-eating big

cats) that have a long and somewhat sensationalised history in India, what other stories exist that seek to understand them?

Non-climate Change Stories

The famous hunter-turned-conservationist of Uttarakhand, Jim Corbett (1947), whose writings on man-eaters in this region remain extremely popular, had also expressed his concern over the increase in conflict between humans and big cats in the early 20th century. He considered big cats to be “fine gentlemen” and puzzled over why these “large hearted, handsome” animals were attacking humans with increasing ferociousness. The residents of Uttarakhand have a variety of different theories on why there has been such a marked increase in attacks on humans by big cats and they were different from the climate change narratives that are gaining traction. I briefly discuss two alternative explanations here.⁵

One explanation for why big cats become man-eaters is rooted in a strong belief in retributive justice. In the Himalaya, I am often told that the large number of killing and poaching of leopards and tigers has made them—as a species and as individuals with distinct histories—angry with humans. The kin of the hunted, mutilated, and poached big cats are seeking revenge on humans by making prey of them in the very same way as their ancestors have been. Another popular theory is that the true provenance of the man-eaters was located in the plains. This theory on the origin of the man-eater believed that when leopards grow old in their zoos in the plains, the *maidanis* (plains persons) send them up to the mountains to die. At other times, when zoos get overcrowded with leopards then, too, they ship them up to the mountains. As these leopards are used to being provided with meals and some are, in any case, too old to hunt wild animals, they turn on the easiest prey of all—humans.

Both explanations for the high prevalence of man-eaters in Uttarakhand need to be understood in the context of the mountain–plains animosity that continues to dominate this region. The identity of being a *pahari* or a mountain person formed the central plank of the movement that was waged by them for a separate “mountain state” in the 1990s. The outcome of the mass mobilisation by the mountain persons in opposition to what they described as a form of internal colonialism by the plains people (*maidani*) allowed for Uttarakhand to be carved out from its parent state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2000 (Mawdsley 1997). The statehood movement had referred to a systematic and historic form of neglect coupled with active exploitation of this region’s rich natural resources such as water, timbers, minerals, and herbs that has been going on from the colonial period right through to the present post-independence nationalist state period. Excessive exploitation of the regions resources, including hunting and poaching of its wildlife, is considered an age-long habit, which animals remember all too well. Similarly, releasing old leopards and tigers from zoos up to what the plainsmen merely consider “jungle” or *pahar* (mountains) with no heed paid, as usual, to the perils this posed for its inhabitants was considered just another event in a long list of actions that combine abuse and neglect of the mountain-people (*paharis*) by the plains people.

Furthermore, there might be some—if not complete—truth to the alternative theories on the man-eaters that are often dismissed as “conspiracy theories.” There is a strong correlation between the practice of hunting and human–animal conflict. As I show, the regions in India that continue to battle big cats are also precisely those where hunting, poaching, and/or trafficking persist. Interestingly, studies with North American cougars and mountain lions have indicated that their hunting leads to an increase in human–big cat conflict—a causal link which is stronger than a mere correlation. Sudarsky (2014) describes it as a sort of “a biological backlash.” In India, similar studies that can find a direct causal link between levels of hunting and levels of conflict are yet to be undertaken. Yet, it is patently clear that the largest number of man-eaters is in those regions where there is the greatest level of hunting.

While this might appear as the classic chicken and egg story (does hunting cause conflict or vice versa?), some claims are being made to this effect. Most powerfully, this trend was mapped by the BBC 2 documentary *Leopards: 21st Century Cats*. In the documentary, we are taken on a ride through high-conflict and low-conflict areas of India. There is some wonderful footage of a leopard eating its kill quite peacefully near humans that he is aware of as well as a region of Rajasthan called Jawai where several leopards come out to a temple with a human priest and display no aggression either towards the human animal or each other or, indeed, the villagers in the vicinity. This peaceful coexistence is contrasted with high conflict regions—most markedly Uttarakhand—to ask why there is such a different relationship between humans and big cats there. They locate the answer in the unprecedented levels of hunting that is allowed in Uttarakhand in stark contrast to the rest of the country. This documentary displays a discernible overlap between what putatively “scientific studies” throw up and what long-term human residents of regions with big cat populations tell us. The notion that man-eaters in the Himalaya are killing and feasting on humans in order to dispel retributive justice might not be, then, quite as far-fetched as it would immediately appear.

On the argument that these are alien leopards that are coming up from zoos in the plains or have been sent up from someplace else, I met many eyewitnesses who swore to seeing the release of big cats into the mountains brought from elsewhere. While I could not establish any official confirmation of this, the practice of capturing and relocating big cats is commonly undertaken by the Indian state. There is ample evidence from around the world to indicate increased human–animal conflict can be the fallout of translocation. Translocation is a process that involves capturing a perceived “problem animal” alive in the area of conflict, and transporting it to another area where the animal is duly released (Linnell et al 1997). This method has gained in popularity since the 1960s due to its non-lethal character. In India, this is particularly attractive given how difficult it is to legally kill the three highly protected big cats (Mathur 2014).

Through an examination of secondary data from the rest of India and their primary analysis in Maharashtra, Athreya and

Belsare (2006) argue that with increased translocation of big cats the level of conflict goes up in the region of the release area. They argue that, in the absence of translocation, serious human–leopard conflict is absent even in high human-density landscapes. Other studies carried out in Maharashtra, a state with high levels of human–leopard conflict, show similar trends (Athreya et al 2004). For instance, in an area called Junnar over 50 humans were attacked over a two-year period—2001–03 and more than 106 leopards were trapped during the same period. Prior to the trapping and capture of the leopards, human–animal conflict was, this study argues, negligible. Another important study was undertaken in Mumbai in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP). This work exhibits very clear correlation between the trapping and relocation of leopards and the spurt in attacks on humans. It traces two peaks in conflict in the SGNP and nearby Thane areas and claims that the reason for the large peak over 2002–04 is a direct outcome of large-scale capture and release of leopards in and around this area (Mumbaikars for SGNP 2014).

Storying the Anthropocene

But let us move beyond the feasibility of these alternative explanations for human–big cat conflict in the Himalaya. What if we were to not take them literally but were to instead regard them as instantiations of critical subaltern speech or as stories that are expressive of embedded multispecies, planetary relationships? What is it that they can then tell us and how might they then possess some connection to climate change?

The alternative explanations for the existence and perceived increase of man-eaters are, quite straightforwardly, voicing discontent with the operations of hegemonic power and, especially, with the marginalisation of the Himalaya. In that sense, they share two key features with climate change: its capacity to reveal the worst aspects of capitalism, especially the gross inequalities the system perpetuates; and the interconnected nature of the globe where actions in one part directly affect the rest.

Let us consider, first, the shared traits of pointing out inequality. The discourse of climate change holds within itself the potential to radically unmask contemporary inequalities. Naomi Klein (2014), amongst many others, argues that climate change is a civilisational wake-up call that makes explicit the many injustices of capitalism. Academic literature and environmental organisations are hard at work, making stronger links between market capitalism, consumption and lifestyle patterns in the West and of the rich in poorer countries, and anthropogenic climate change. The alternative stories, too, indicate a world, albeit within the nation state of India, where people in the plains continue to live on in relative comfort and ease with little heed paid to the mountains people. At the same time as they are releasing big cats in the mountains they are also unthinkingly using up the region's natural water or cutting down their forests for personal use. The suspicion of people from the plains, in fact, stems from precisely this long-standing ecological devastation that has been visited upon the Himalaya by the colonial and postcolonial state.

Let us turn to the second correspondence between climate change and the alternative stories: their shared capacity to reveal the interconnectedness of the world. A defining feature of climate change is the manner in which it shifts scale from the local to the global; from specific communities and spaces to a global “us.” The Himalayas primarily figure in mainstream accounts in India as the distant and supposedly-natural frontier of the nation. The critical stance vis-à-vis the Indian state cannot but be linked to the overwhelming feeling of neglect that echoes through this region. While the release of big cats or the maidani nature of the adamkhor refers to this sense of neglect and/or exploitation, it also demonstrates how these spaces remain closely entangled. Similarly, the theory that leopards and tigers are seeking retribution from humans and hence become man-eaters demonstrates a deep awareness of historical injustices.

One of the criticisms of climate change and the Anthropocene remains its neglect of the rapaciousness of empire. In the Indian Himalaya, this history of colonial appropriation is impossible to miss, as is the current discontent with an extension of similar practices by the postcolonial state (Mathur 2016a).

What I have described here are two seemingly distinct narratives: a legitimised, science-based one that adduces certain phenomena to be caused by climate change. The counter-narrative to this, voiced by Himalayan residents, did not refer to climate change but rather spoke of history, retribution, neglect, violence towards both humans and non-human animals, exploitation of biodiversity, and even non-human migration and capture. These accounts of human–animal conflict do not speak in the abstract—like an article in the top journals *Science* or *Nature*—but work through more embodied and impassioned rhetorical styles. Difference in tone and content should not, however, blind climate translators to their overlapping claims. Just as critical work on climate change shows us how the local is folded into the global, so too do the alternative stories in the Indian Himalaya draw our attention to inequality and active marginalisation, albeit within the nation state of India.

To illustrate this claim, let me end with snippets of an interview I conducted with a young man who had his right arm chewed off by a leopard. This young man had been walking home from a friend's house one evening when the leopard suddenly appeared from nowhere and dug his teeth into his arm. As it was early evening and he was in the middle of the town, other people came running up to defend him and managed to yank the leopard off his body. In doing so, a large chunk of his arm was ripped off and had to be subsequently amputated in its entirety. All through our conversation, he kept gesturing with his left hand to the prominent absence on the right side of his body:

Do you know why that leopard attacked me? Because he has no food left for himself anymore up here in the mountains. Everything here is dying: the forests, the rivers, the soil, the animals. The only living beings left are us humans and even we won't last here for much longer at the rate things are going. And the reason for all of this is that they [the They he is referring to is the Indian state and the plains people] come here to cut down our trees, to steal our water and to generate electricity for this own houses in the cities of the plains ... they drive around in their big cars but they don't even bother to build roads for us up here. Their industries spew out all this filth which comes up here to

ruin our environment ... We are being eaten up by leopards but even then they remain more concerned with saving the life of the leopard than our human life. I don't blame the *adamkhor bagh* but I do blame our *sarkar* (State) that is nothing but a *kaghazi bagh* (paper tiger).

Narratives of such a nature were absolutely commonplace. They consistently referred to an exploitative state that was only interested in furthering the interests of its own narrow coterie of powerful and wealthy people, all living in the distant plains of India. To do so not only did they not care if human lives were being brutally lost, but also they were interested only in the exploitation and expropriation of the rich natural resources of the mountains even as they pay lip service to the need to conserve big cats. While the narratives emanating from victims and their families did not actually utilise the term "climate change," all the practices that they were talking of are the ones that contribute to anthropogenic climate change. Furthermore, the utilisation of metaphors of death, destruction and endings in these localised narratives bear strong affinity to more mainstream narratives on catastrophic climate change for instance of the sort presented in recent cli-fi works such as Kingsolver (2012) and Martin (2011).

To exploit the political potential of the Anthropocene, we need to pay careful attention to these stories, appreciate their powerful political and ecological imaginaries, and take on the task of climate translators. Climate translations can ground the Anthropocene within localised politics and ecosystems and can serve to relay the voices, imaginaries, and opinions of those people, such as the residents of the Indian Himalaya described here, who are already coping with the damaging consequences of global warming. One need not, after all, be able to use the (English language) category of climate change or speak the same expert language of environmental change and damage or even subscribe to the universalism of science to know that climate change is an overwhelming threat.

Conclusions: For a Climate of Imagination

In a prominent intervention, Amitav Ghosh (2016) has railed against what he considers an astonishing failure to grasp the urgency of climate change. He notes that though South Asia is

"extraordinarily vulnerable to climate change" (p 168) and India as a country is highly politicised with great amounts of indignation and outrage expressed on a wide range of issues, "yet climate change has not resulted in an outpouring of passion in the country" (2016: 169). "Instead," he goes on to write, "political energy [in South Asia] has increasingly come to be focused on issues that relate, in one way or another, to questions of identity: religion, caste, ethnicity, language, gender rights and so on" (Ghosh 2016: 169).

My argument runs significantly counter to Ghosh's reading. I would argue that questions of identity as well expressions of indignation and outrage on other—political but not directly ecological/climatic—issues should be folded into discussions of the Anthropocene. In fact, the biggest weakness of the Anthropocene as well as much of the work on climate change is, as argued above, its obliviousness to precisely these issues of inequalities and differential subject positions within the Anthropos. Criticism of, and a profound awareness of climate change, abounds in the political. Those seemingly absurd counter-narratives describe here—big cats being shipped up to eat the natives or big cats turning on humans for the purpose of retributive justice—can and ought to be seen as angry commentaries on the wider politics and practices underpinning anthropogenic climate change. As an ethnographer and climate translator, I contend the unthinkability of the impending climate crisis that Ghosh finds in fiction.

In the quotidian chatter of my friends and interlocutors in the Himalaya, I hear several prescient accounts of the past, present, and future of human as well as non-human animals like the endangered tiger and leopard. What these stories depict, in almost poetic terms, are our knotty inter-species entanglements in the Anthropocene. A failure of the imagination is evident not, as Ghosh despairs, in the deep politicisation of the world to the exclusion of an ecological focus. Rather, it lies in our inability to act as climate translators and to read these political commentaries as intrinsically critical of the processes that cause and sustain global warming in the first place.

NOTES

- 1 The Anthropocene or the "Age of the Human" refers to the claim that human activity has had such a strong impact on global ecosystems that we should consider humans (the *Anthropos*) as a geologic force in their own right. The precise timeline of the Anthropocene remains disputed, but it is now officially recognised as the current geologic epoch of planet Earth following on from the Holocene. In its origin as well as current conceptualisations, the Anthropocene is drawn from an acute awareness of climate change and its present and future impact.
- 2 See <http://earthlysurvival.org> for *Donna Haraway: Story Telling For Earthly Survival*, a film by Fabrizio Terranova.
- 3 One of the most sophisticated accounts of both anthropologists as cultural translators and a critique of this position remains Asad's (1986) essay. I agree with his cautioning against the inequality of languages: "... the anthropological enterprise of cultural translation may be vitiated

by the fact that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies. And I have suggested that anthropologists need to explore these processes in order to determine how far they go in defining the possibilities and limits of effective translation" (1986: 164). Such an awareness of power remains of the essence, but I would also argue that climate translations—if sensitively undertaken—can challenge precisely the domination of climate change knowledge by both the natural sciences as well as what Asad describes as "dominant societies."

- 4 A good example of this from a different part of India is a news item on the BBC, which relates the story of man-eating tigers in the Sundarbans. Records of man-eating tigers in the Sundarbans can be found as far back as the 16th century but up till the recent entry of climate change as a possible explanation, the cause of the man-eatingness remained a mystery. Human–animal

conflict when considered a tangible indicator and of direct result of climate change suddenly received more public attention. So, for instance, the BBC feature begins with the statement: "Tiger attacks on humans are on the increase in the Sundarbans, the region between India and Bangladesh, and scientists are blaming this on climate change". See, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-21069750>.

- 5 Several other reasons are given that account for the making of a man-eater. I do not detail them here due to space considerations but see Mathur (forthcoming).

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NEW

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- Number of Bank Offices—By Population Group

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