Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550–1850. Sugata Ray. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. xi + 242 pp. $70. Hardcover ISBN-13: 978-0295745374.

Sugata Ray's *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion* is enchanting and compelling. Ray musters visual and textual evidence for an original approach to representations of the natural environment in art and temple architecture devoted to the god Krishna during a three-hundred-year time span, 1550-1850. The basic premise of this elegantly composed and organized book is that planet-wide climatic upheavals during an era known to European history as the "Little Ice Age" also affected South Asia; however, in South Asia the impact of these disturbances was experienced as extreme droughts and famines. "Artistic and architectural practices" developed during this period, Ray believes, "were shaped through human interaction with geographical, geological, botanical, zoological, mineralogical, astronomical, and climatic formations" (22). Ray's examples are largely located in the region of Vrindavan associated with the well-known mythology of Krishna's idyllic childhood and youth spent in the pastoral community that fostered and adored him. Ray ably deploys abundant visual and textual evidence to support his audacious argument while fully acknowledging that these associations ultimately remain speculative. It is oddly counterintuitive that the enchanted realm of Vrindavan where God plays blissfully and eternally and that pilgrims wish only to share that untethered bliss, somehow reflects devastating geo-physical realities. Ray's careful arguments, however, are persuasive. He has executed the "eco art history" that he proposes in exemplary fashion.

Lavishly illustrated with over one hundred beautifully reproduced color illustrations, Ray's book addresses intersections of climate change not only with art and religion, but also with politics and history. His extensive interdisciplinary research draws on sources beyond art and architectural history including anthropology, history of religions, cultural studies, and colonial and postcolonial histories. He is attentive to evident Mughal and British colonial influences at work during the period under study. One of his recurrent themes is that causalities are multiple and lines of causality are transversal, a term he borrows from the French psychotherapist and philosopher Felix Guattari.

Following a lucid introduction, four substantial chapters discuss, respectively, Water, Land, Forest, and Ether. Water is key to the rest of the arguments, for Little Ice Age climate change disruptions, according to Ray, would have had the greatest impact on rain and rivers. This affected theological thought, altering the ways devotional artists and temple-builders in Vrindavan depicted the Yamuna River and Krishna's water play with his female companions, the collectivity of gopis or cowherd girls, and Radha, his consort, among them. It also influenced local rulers and their construction projects. Ray writes,

> the emergence of a distinctive aesthetics of seeing flowing water thus carefully interwove Vaishnava theology, political governance, and the ritualized act of beholding the natural environment. In such a beholding, hydroaesthetics became the crucial link that joined localized creative practices with an expanded nonhuman transterritorial area of water scarcity in the early modern world (57).

"Hydroaesthetics" is one of several terms fielded by Ray that encapsulates his innovative approach.

The chapter "Land" centers on Mount Govardhan and its corporal identification with divine Krishna. Krishna not only holds up the mountain to protect his community from the jealous wrath of Indra, but he is understood to be embodied as the mountain. Stones have agency. Devotees experience "corporal topophilia" when in the presence of this divinized earth. Many of the observations in "Land" reminded me strongly of things farmers and herders told me during fieldwork in rural Rajasthan. A deity's presence renders unremarkable landscapes precious; people explain a formation of large leaning stones as those stones' expression of reverence for a divinity who passed them long ago.

The chapter "Forest" begins by evoking the rich biodiversity of the "ecosphere of early modern Braj." By the second half of the eighteenth century, that same landscape had changed significantly at a shockingly rapid pace as more and more land came under cultivation to feed the growing population. The response to this radical deforestation in Krishna devotion, following Ray's argument, seems to have been an intensive development of a focus for pilgrims on *kunja* which Ray translates as "verdant bower." In other words, while Vrindavan's forests may be denuded, the bower is a limited and protected space. Here we find, in Ray's words, a "vegetal aesthetics of abundance" (101). Ray points out that those bowers that were maintained for devotees to experience in Vrindavan replicated not the actual woods prior to deforestation but rather evoked the landscape of earlier devotional poetry. That imagined landscape included not only densely planted trees, but fish, deer, birds, and lotus flowers—a fecund setting for Radha and Krishna to have their illicit divine trysts. Ray also draws an interesting contrast between Hindu bowers and Mughal gardens of that same era. The latter are all about patterns and order; the dark, lush, verdant bowers are not exactly wild nor are they fully tamed. Ray also links the devotees' immersive experience in a bower to ideas about Krishna's *lila*: his eternal divine play and the possibilities for humans to participate.

"Ether" is the least substantial chapter. Ray stretches to link Ether with Little Ice Age climate change. For example, he states somewhat vaguely that, "Ether, consequently, functions in eco art history as both a metaphor and a tangible circumambient matter that literally connects subjects across vast spaces" (155). However, this chapter notably shows some fascinating links between temple architecture and colonialism. I was still skeptical when I read that, "Ether, then, was the element that constituted, connected, and held a planetary imaginary of the colonized" (167); however, plate 4.27 persuaded me. It is a photograph of an astonishing room in a Vrindavan temple adorned with fifteen Belgian chandeliers where, in Ray's words, we encounter a "vision of paradisiacal Vrindavan that was luminous with golden pollen" and "Krishna could play eternally with his devotees amid bejeweled trees" (168).

Ray concludes his book, not reiterating and reemphasizing points but posing further ideas for thought. In many ways, the Coda, "Geoaesthetics in a Hindu Pilgrimage Town," is the opposite of closure, opening new vistas. In it, the author engages with pilgrimage maps which can be touched by devotees in order to share in pilgrimage blessings (something I have seen frequently in

Rajasthan where Ray encountered it as well). The final plate in the book, a light box from a 2008 installation titled "the Water Diviner" by Sheba Chhachhi, shows disfiguring piles of trash superimposed on a typical water play painting where hennaed, bare-breasted gopis are bathing. The overall impact is crushing, and it seems no accident that Krishna is absent. It leaves us sadly longing for the overflowing clean rivers and lush bowers to rematerialize; here they are barely ghosts. Ray speaks again of "planetary geoaesthetics" in his final paragraph, but there is a mournful flatness to his words.

As an anthropologist of contemporary India, having studied pilgrimage, as well as cultural constructions of the changing environment, I found some of Ray's observations about theological shifts in Vrindavan to be strikingly resonant with things I knew from contemporary Rajasthan. These include, as already mentioned, the ways a divine being is identified with a landscape as well as the ways elements of nature possess agency and participate in worship. From Ray, I gather the origins and implications of such everyday rural world views. As a professor teaching Hinduism and ecology, I regularly show images of Krishna and the gopis at play in sylvan settings or Krishna and Radha making love in dark forest bowers. I used this art carelessly to illustrate poetry composed many centuries earlier. Ray's book corrects my ahistorical vision, offering invaluable depth and context for the devotional art produced in North India during centuries coinciding with the Little Ice Age. I recommend this beautiful volume (truly a bargain at $70) to those who know Krishna lore and imagery well and equally to non-South Asianists interested in environmental humanities as we all should be in these ominous times.

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