

Recall This Book 66  
Critical Conversation: Multi-Species Community (Patricia Alvarez Astacio, GT,  
JP)  
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John Plotz: From Brandeis University, welcome to a special Recall This book where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems and events. What's special. Well, this is a live recording of a critical conversation that took place at Brandeis, as part of our multispecies month and in response to the appearance on campus and Peter Godfrey Smith talking about his book, other mods. And the challenges posed by the alterity of octopus consciousness. So, we assembled 3 scholars. One of them is me to discuss from various disciplinary perspectives what we make of the alterity of other animal forms of being experience consciousness. And intelligence, and how they interact with the human and specifically you will hear a neuroscientist genius Reggiano and the anthropologist Patricia Alvarez Astacio. And me talking mostly about Patricia's work, which is centered on alpaca human communities in the Peruvian Andes, and our conversation ranges beyond that. But in the show notes, you'll find ways to go back and pick out links to her scholarly work and also to her visual work, because she's a filmmaker. As well, taking advantage of the high visual appeal of those human alpaca interactions that she discusses. So, with that we pivot to the actual recording of that live event.

Matthew Hedrick: Welcome to the first critical conversation of this year. My name is Matthew Hedrick. I'm a physics professor and I'm the chair of the first-year experienced critical conversations committee, and on behalf of the committee, I'd like to welcome all of you to this first critical conversation of the year, which is on the topic other minds. Forming communities with nonhuman animals. And the idea with these critical conversations is to showcase the intellectual

vibrancy of Brandeis, in particular, across fields and so. Our moderatoren discussions today, I think, really embody that so my job is just to introduce them and then and then shut up and let. Have an interesting conversation, but I think what's interesting is they really span what you could call the intellectual diameter of of the university. They're from 3 very different areas, so we have Patricia Alvarez Astacio who is in the middle. Who's an assistant professor of anthropology? And and who studied? Various things, including the the alpaca, wool and clothing industry in Peru, and what's interesting is she not only does her scholarship in the usual form of the written word, but is also a filmmaker. And the other discussant. Do we have today? Is Gina Turrigiano, who's Levitan professor of vision and a world-famous neuroscientist who has done very important work understanding. Uh, plasticity and stability. The interplay between plasticity and stability in neuronal circuits in the. And the moderator today is John Plotz Mandel, professor of the humanities, whose scholarship is in English literature and ranges from Victorian literature to science fiction and beyond, but. Whose intellect range is well beyond that and and as illustrated, for example, that by the fact that he has not one but two podcasts on books, which I find really impressive and is also one of the organizers of a a prison education project, the Brandeis. Educational justice initiative. So here we have these three formidable intellects who are going to talk about. But this topic that comes from the first year book that I hope you all read that I found quite fascinating myself, other minds and and so, as I promised, after introducing them, I would shut up. And so now I will leave it to. I guess John, who will explain how it's going to happen.

John Plotz:

This is going to be a conversation maybe. Between Gina Patricia and I'm really. You know, just going to be here lobbing questions at them, but then there's going to be plenty of time for you guys to ask questions as well, and you can see there's a couple of microphones, so we're going to pivot to that sort of open conversation format towards the

end of the hour. So, as you know, the organizing principle for today's conversation is the idea of multi species community and I guess if we have an ethical agenda, I'm going to try to sum it up in one word which is anti-anthropocentric. It's kind of a portmanteau word, one where. We share this. Word world with innumerable species. Genus I had millions, but I was afraid Gina was going to correct me with lots and lots of species, many of which have complex social systems and high intelligence. So, can these species communities inform how we approach? Global communal challenges such as the degradation of the. Environment, and so, as you've just heard, this conversation is definitely inspired by the new student Book Forum selection and one of the chairs of that committee, Gina, is here, and that selection was other minds the octopus to see in the deep. Origins of consciousness. By Peter Godfrey Smith. So basically, as we speak here today, I want you to picture an octopus. That is, I want you to think about what Godfrey Smith had to say about the various models of cognition, sensation, and experience that we actually encounter in the animal species we know. And I would say this is even true for our backyard pets or our dogs and cats. You know there's difference going on there, interesting. Difference and also consider what that diversity right here on Earth has to tell us about the potentiality of even greater diversity. So yeah, I'm into science fiction, but I will say whether those other consciousness is and forms of cognition that we can imagine really exist or not, like actually. Nonetheless the thought. Experiment is crucial for the anti-anthropocentrism that I think a Brandeis education is going to help. You to culture. So, I just want to say one word before we begin about a person who isn't up here on the stage but is really important. Elizabeth Fairy, who I'm not sure if she's here today, but she is not. She is so good she inaugurate where's your handle very. Oh yeah, yes, your glasses too. OK, so Elizabeth very really had the German was the germinal insight for this conversation. But she's the man behind the curtain. There, so let me turn now to Gina and Patricia the stars of the show. And basically, if I could put

you on the spot, could you each to say maybe one sentence or one paragraph about what about what you hope will get out of today's conversation?

Gina Turrigiano: Sure, hi everyone, it's a lot of fun to be here. It's been a lot of fun. Sort of planning. What we're going to do today? You know, I guess as a as a biologist, I'm really keenly aware of our connections to other species. And the really intricate web that we exist within and we rely on this web for. Uhm, for our life you. Know for food for. For clean air, for clean water, it's really impacts. So many aspects of our lives and yet. Humans have modified our environment to such an incredible degree that we can exist, and we can go for long periods of time without ever really encountering or noticing those connections. And so, I guess if I had to hope from this conversation, what you might get out of it is that it would prompt you. To really to to open your eyes and to to look for these connections to see them, maybe maybe even to feel them.

Patricia Alvarez Astacio: Yes, so I think I have the same hope as Gina and I come from it from a different angle, right? I think that not only we don't notice them, but it's about kind of re attuning and this re attuning also makes us think about our own culture. And our own communities, and how we've learned to see or not to see the environment. So how can we kind of reflexively recognize those ways in which we've been taught to? Not see or recognize or overemphasize certain connections or read them in a particular way, right? How can we see them in a new form, right? How can we also kind of open our eyes to those ways in which we give nature and animals? This kind of cultural and social meaning as well, right? As like a first step of also of recognizing.

John Plotz: So so, one question I had for both of you guys really, but in a way Gina, I think it might relate to you just kind of mobilizing your biological knowledge is just to talk about how we would think about this. This example of the multi

species community in a greater context of like the multi species communities that we all kind of live with.

Gina Turrigiano: Right, I mean, I think. Many of them that are really influential for us are kind of invisible, like one example that does not involve intelligent species would be thinking about our microbiome, for instance, and this is something I'm sure all of you have heard about. You know that we were a colony we have. Uh, you know, 1000 species of microbes that coexist with us, and these are really critical symbiotic relationships. We obviously give them a a place to live and and we supply them with nutrients, but they supply us with nutrients as well. And you know, it's it sort of changes your perspective on the world when you think about yourself, not as a. Just an individual, but actually as a as this incredibly complex colony that we we you know we depend upon, and you know the influences I. I mean, some of this is overhyped, probably, but it goes beyond just supplying nutrients. You know, there's there's growing evidence that some of these micro. Groups generate neuroactive compounds that actually influence our mood and our behavior in very important ways. So, so you know, that's a really odd thing to think about. It's completely most of the time invisible to us, you know, unless you have to take antibiotics or. Something and then. You feel really bad for a while. And that's because you've kind of decimated this community and it actually has to regrow, and it isn't going to come back the same way it did necessarily, right? Because you might have wiped out some some elements of that of that complicated. You know, these are all interacting with each other, and they fill different niches. So that's one, I think, sort of interesting aspect is that a lot of these communities like this is a very visible example right where you see these people depend upon these animals for their their livelihood. It's just really intertwined into the way they. They know every aspect of how they live, but there are all these invisible connections like that that we are subject to all the time. I wonder what the alpaca eye view is on this. You know what? What

did? What did the alpaca get from this relationship? I mean, it's really clear that the what the human. Gain is and that this is a really respectful relationship, but you know, from the alpaca's point of view, why don't they just disappear into the into the Andes and not come back? You know, I see, I remember seeing them wandering around up into the hills, and you know nothing is keeping them right.

Patricia Alvarez Astacio: And they they don't run away like that, but. One of the things that happens because of the ways in which. Humans have not evolved by themselves, right? Like we've evolved alongside with different kinds of animals. So, with who evolved?

John Plotz: Dogs especially yeah.

Patricia Alvarez Astacio: Yeah, with dogs and quibbled others, we've. Made them evolve into things. They need to. Be sheared like like sheep too, right? And there was this like really. Uhm story a couple of years ago. A really interesting story. About this I'm. Runaway sheep in Australia that got lost for I don't. Know how many months and they couldn't. Find it and. Eventually someone stumbled upon it and the wool had grown so large that it had got. Caught between trees and couldn't. Move and who knows for how long it had? Been like dangling. In the forest or in the Bush. And so, if I guys need humans to to hear them right, they could not, just 'cause it's just going to keep growing. And so, then that hinders their lives. They also get. Medical attention if they get sick. Right, or if they're injured, they. Get these kinds of kind of human and veterinary. Or kind of indigenous. Forms of care and. They get. You know if if we go into kind of ambient cosmology over the mythology, right? The alpacas are the animals that that. Move in between the. And a spirit realm. And the human. Realm as well so. There's this kind of very interesting being.

John Plotz: But you said, can I connect that to something Gina said at

the beginning? 'cause I hear you; I hear you saying there's an importance to the specificity of an indigenous form of respect, the way that the the these are, animals that are woven into a coherent cosmology. But Gina, you also began by saying, like. We worry about getting cut off from our larger biological context, so so the question I have is kind of tricky. It's about like I want to respect the difference of the. Indigenous forms of knowledge or understanding as opposed to you know our own Waltham perspective, but also think about the common threads there. You know, 'cause there's a way to tell the story where that is like you can. You know? Alienate that as a form of knowledge, but I don't hear you doing that. I think it's more like it actually is connected to to Gina's point about, like being aware of webs of of commonness or so.

Patricia Alvarez Astacio: Yeah, I I as an anthropologist like you know I. Think it's important to recognize knowledge and points of view. As well, and I think it also speaks to. Right, how our culture and our society and our sets of beliefs allow us to see and understand nature in particular ways. And then that. Shapes our behavior towards nature, so regardless of the truthfulness, right? If the alpacas are actually this being, that could do this or not. Understanding them in this way and imagining that they have this other kind of point of view. Makes humans treat the alpacas and their environment in a particular way that I think is very different from us and that you know we can recognize, you know. How do we see head of animals right? How do we see those relationships? What kind of knowledge do we value about animals? We can see how that shapes how we. Behave towards animal. What animals we want around us, what animals we don't want to see and want to do away with. Which ones are? OK test pads, which ones are not OK as pets? What kind of of? Who we want in our community. And who we don't want and and why? I think we're really not conscious about that and that lack of seeing has to be consequences.

John Plotz: So, I want to connect that, but I've been dying to ask about. Basically, this is the question about pigeons and rats. So, I don't exactly know how to formulate it, but you know, we humans. You know Gina again, you said we are sort of cut off from our awareness of our environment, but in another way, we have success. Fully kind of wasted slash transformed so much of the globe. And of course, you know cows live on that globe and chickens live on the globe. But also, all of these species that we think of as kind of dirty, but they depend on a human condition. So how do? You guys think about that? I mean not so much untainted wilderness, but just like the waste. You know which is made by humans, but it isn't only inhabited.

Gina Turrigiano: By him, right? I mean, I think we're at a point in. You know human takeover of the planet if you will, where you know no, no, no. Animal species can avoid interacting with humans. I mean, there's almost no place on Earth where you can have a, you know, a community of animals that doesn't have to in some way deal with us, right? And some animals have. Animal communities have adapted to that very well, and I was actually thinking. About corvids which are one of my my favorites, you know?

John Plotz: Oh yes, it's so smart.

Gina Turrigiano: So, corvids are crows, Ravens, Jays, rooks. And they're just an incredibly, you know, playful, intelligent. You know? And and what's interesting is that many of those species actually have thrived as human populations have grown, and part of the reason for that is that they're really adaptable. You know, they're they're omnivores. They can eat just about anything, so they'll eat pet food, or they'll eat some the roadkill, right? All sorts of things that humans provide. In in abundance. And and at the same time you know our relationship with them is not necessarily just as a relationship with a with a pest, right? I mean. If you think about the role that crows and Ravens have played in all sorts of mythologies and religions. You know they've had

this really important impact on. The way humans view the world and again, the relationship between when us and. In these different aspects of being, you know, crows are typically the trickster animals, right? Yeah, spiders too. Right? So, so there are interesting situations where you know these animals have really managed to take advantage of what human culture has generated. And of course, there's many examples where where the outcome has been much, much sadder than that. You know, I I spent quite a bit of time trying to befriend some crows in my yard during the pandemic, but I had this neighbor who who subsequently moved out, but he was. He didn't like crows very much, just fit that way. He was trying to grow all of these vegetables and hops and things like that, but the crows are always raiding and so he would sit on his porch with his, you know, shotgun and he would you know and and the crows knew I wasn't him, but they still didn't trust me because, you know, like I would, I would talk to him. And I would tell. Him not to shoot the crows. But so, they can recognize different people and really adapt their behavior to that.

John Plotz: But I like that I I. Threw up pigeon as an example which is one where we feel squeamish about an animal that does well close to us. But a crow is a better example because it's kind of. It's got a little bit of independent agency or something.

Gina Turrigiano: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And when you start to think about. You know how we view? Or how we can understand, you know, alien consciousness is, I think the crow is also a great example to think about, especially if you contrast it to an octopus. For instance, you know you know they're a bird really different evolutionarily from mammals, and yet they can. Use tools solve complex problems, communicate. You know. I hear these calls, some of them say, oh, someone bringing food to the compost pile, you know? And then all. The crows converge or you know, so you know. So, you can actually differentiate some of their calls. Anyway, yeah.

Patricia Alvarez Astacio: No, I I. Think that's something? I I was. Thinking about pigeons and thinking about not only pages but all these other animals that now because of. How we've encroached in their spaces are now entering and living in urban areas like it's like. That wasn't common before, right? So, like in Europe, there's a big issue with boars, so now you find wild boars in most cities 'cause they kind of need to live. And they're kind of adapting and. And some of them. Become pests and others are kind of welcome and and it's interesting to think about. Right, I'm from Puerto Rico and almost all the animals we have there are invasive species like the bigger ones, so we have like Vietnamese pigs which are super cute or adorable. Our pets for most people. But now there's an overpopulation of them, they've gone. Wild and they're. Pests for us, right? Or thinking about our national frog. But the cookie. Which is this tiny little tree frog that sings at night and for us it's like the best sound to go to bed and somehow, they ended up in Hawaii and their pets. People can't stand them right and they can't wait like they took to displace this kind of community out of the area. And to to think about also. What is it? About particular kinds of animals and the ways they make themselves at. Home in our spaces that allows us to welcome them or or not, right? I think it's it's.

John Plotz: Yeah, I was thinking about that Thomas Hardy line, which Mary Douglas gets credit for it. But it's really Thomas Hardy. Dirt is matter out of place, so it's like. A pet from. Pet to pest is just a semantic distinction. It's not, yeah, so can I. I think this is a related question. It basically given that we're thinking about what we stand to learn from multi species communities. So, there is a lot of species out there with complex social structures and intelligence like the crow. I was thinking actually about ants, which are. I mean it is true. Humans have impacted them, but they don't. They seem kind of unchanged by that you know. So, as we contemplate the implications of the Anthropocene, that is like a world that we put our big thumb everywhere. What

can we learn from other species that might inform? Our own way of being in the world.

Patricia Alvarez Astacio: Kind of as an anthropologist. What the way I think about this question again goes back to. You know, I, I think there's a. Very common way. Of of still seeing what we can. Learn about animals and lenses. Very kind of instrumental way and I'm thinking here. There's another anthropologists have studied bees and how the military studies behavior to develop the technology right so that we can kind of continue putting our. Marking more and more and more spaces. So, my interest, I think, is that when we go outside of our Western. Kind of viewpoint, right? That we've grown up in where nature is out there, and we are humans, and we have culture, and we mold nature to our needs. Needs even if that need is to appreciate it right and go on a hike and eliminate human traits from it, right? Like when we go outside of that framework, which is also part of. The perspective that has allowed us to intervene in the natural world to the point that we've, you know, messed up with geology. We do a little time. I think you know, stepping out of that perspective and seeing how. Other folks around the world see and understand themselves in relation to nature or maybe see themselves as part of nature and what that entails can give us ideas for how to see differently, how we relate to nature and potentially think. Of other ways of. Tackling these issues that aren't just. Like oh, these are really good at this. Let's like use electronic and AI to mimic it to further our interests, right? Like like I said, like I you know, I learned a lot from people how people hurt alpacas, but I think what I took out of it was a. Different way of. It's not like oh now now I'm going to go to the alpaca farm and tell people how to properly take care of the animals that they can do better, but kind of a different sensibility of how to think of myself in relation to animals, how to treat the animals. How do we engage with them? How to reckon with the fact that. I'm a human and I eat meat and I also care about animals and the environment, right? And maybe the

option is not being vegan, but like how can I kind of rethink my position in relation to something I deeply care about so that I could kind of maybe work towards a different kind of shift so using those? I guess to be really. Be more imaginative.

Gina Turrigiano: Yeah, I can think of so many answers to that. Some of them are utilitarian and you know, there's a lot of utilitarian answers, but I actually want to give it maybe a slightly different one. You know, thinking as a neuroscientist and again thinking back to. Uh, there's a book that you all read about octopuses. You know, part of, I think what we can get out of interacting with other species and other communities of animals is a real expansion in in our view of.

Gina Turrigiano: You know the the way ways of being in the world. Ways of. Uhm, forming a society I mean a lot of these animals have very complex social structures, and they're very different from ours or. You know, again, thinking you know, watching an animal like a crow solve a problem in a way that might blow your mind that they could do this, but it might be very different from the way you would solve that problem. Also, and so I think it can give us this incredible appreciation for diversity that is diverse. Ways of solving problems. Diverse ways of being in the world, that that is incredible. Really useful for us as a species, because if we're going to really make progress as we go forward and have happier. Uhm, you know interactions with people who do things, different ways and have different beliefs and different ways of being in the world. Then I think those perspectives are really incredibly valuable. So, and it's also just there's real beauty in it, you know. So, for me, that. I think that that's maybe the you know for me, that's why I like to to go out in the world and see other species doing the things they do you.

John Plotz: Know it's I mean those films of crows playing by sliding down snow piles like those are they're beautiful. You're right, I was going to say they were fun, but that's the wrong word. Beautiful is a better word, yeah? So, I just want to wind down here with just a few related announcements, I

will say. That Gina continues her fabulous work on sleep and brain plasticity, but I also wanted to mention that Patricia, I think this is right. You're now making a film about the. Color magenta is that. True, that's an amazing. OK, that's the conversation for next year.

Patricia Alvarez Astacio: It's a process right now working on one and Thoroughbred racehorses.

John Plotz: OK.

Speaker 1: That's wow.

Patricia Alvarez Astacio: And dental.

John Plotz: And I also wanted to say if this topic interests you guys, please go to the podcast that Elizabeth Ferry and I run together. Recall this book if you subscribe to it tonight, tomorrow morning at 4:00 AM, the next episode is coming out, which is our conversation with with Professor Godfrey Smith while. He was here at Brandeis, so we actually go into some of these questions about bird intelligence in that conference. And the book the website also has further material including an amazing essay that Professor Ferry found about touch in chimpanzees. So, another way of thinking about these communities so you guys thank you so much. That was just a wonderful. Back includes our live recording of a Brandeis critical conversation Envision specifically as part of our multispecies month that we call this book. This podcast is sponsored by Brandeis and Mandel Humanity Center. sound editing by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery. The English department, Gina, Patricia, and I are eager to hear your comments, criticism, and thoughts on today's discussion. So please write. A review or read us on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts and from all of us here at RTB. Thanks for listening.