

Beyond the Rainbow Bridge:

Vernacular Ontologies and Animal Afterlives

Thursday October 5th, 11:30-1:00 ANSO 134



To what extent do modern Westerners imagine animals as spiritual beings? How do they view animals' interiority compared with their own? In this paper, I explore vernacular ontologies about animals that exist alongside dominant Western notions. In these narratives, animals are portrayed as having interiority similar to that of humans, living on after death in spiritual form, and interacting with humans as messengers from spiritual realms. My findings, based on a large mixed-methods study and ethnographic data, demonstrate that across religious traditions, people create vernacular ontologies that contradict official religious and scientific teachings, but are at least partly based on interpretations of empirical experiences. I hypothesize that as personhood is increasingly extended to companion animals, people are more likely to imagine afterlives for all animals that parallel their beliefs about human afterlives. Moreover, people are more likely to deviate from scientific and religious tenets when they have personal experiences of a spiritual nature involving animals.

with Professor Sabina Magliocco