

What is it to Witness?: Humans, Animals and Visuality in Urban India

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A prominent animal rights activist in New Delhi, explaining her relentlessness on behalf of animals, said to me the following: "I only wish there were a slaughterhouse next door. To witness that violence, to hear those screams . . . I would work even harder. I would never be able to rest." She was not alone among animal welfare activists in India in linking the witnessing of violence against an animal to the creation of a profound bond that demanded from them a life of responsibility.

In this paper, I rethink the concept of intimacy through this human witnessing of violence against a non-human life and the subsequent tethering of human to non-. As Elizabeth Povinelli has recently elaborated, the very meaning of 'intimacy' within Enlightenment thought is the freely chosen bond between sovereign subjects. Might the case of the human and animal further complicate that crucial fiction? These activists show us that where proper intimacy is inconceivable (between human and animal), the witnessing of violence both explodes and exacerbates the species divide, leading the human to a sense of singular, intimate knowledge of a singular Other's life, but an intimacy that requires the giving of 'voice' for that other which cannot speak.

Naisargi N. Dave is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Her research concerns emergent forms of politics and relationality in contemporary urban India. Her first and ongoing project concerns queer activism in India and explores the relationship of activism, ethics, and affect. She is also beginning a new project, funded by a SSRHC Standard Research Grant, on animal rights in India. Professor Dave teaches courses on the anthropology of South Asia, affect, ethics, anthropological theory, social movements, and gender and sexuality.

This event is part of the [Colloquia on Contemporary South Asia](#) organized by the South Asian Studies Programme and the York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR). It is co-hosted by the Graduate Programme in Social Anthropology.

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