



## WITNESS: Humans, Animals, and the Politics of Becoming

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Maneka Gandhi, of India's famed political dynasty, the Nehru-Gandhis, is India's best-known animal rights activist. In the introduction to one of her books she explains what brought her to her activism ([Gandhi 2000](#)). She references the memoir of one of India's first animal welfare activists, Crystal Rogers, a Britisher born in 1906 who found herself called by the sight of a dying animal in 1959 to stay and work in India. The passage Gandhi cites from [Rogers's \(2000, 42–44\)](#) memoir, *Mad Dogs and an Englishwoman*, reads as follows:<sup>1</sup>

I was on my way to New Zealand when I saw a horse which caused me to remain in India. It was standing at the side of a very busy road, with the crows tearing the flesh off its back. As I ran towards it, it turned its head towards me and to my horror I saw that it had bleeding sockets from which the crows had already pecked out its eyes. I rang up the SPCA [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] but there was little that could be done and the horse had to be shot. If any passerby had done something earlier the horse might have been saved. I cancelled my journey to New Zealand and stayed in India to see what I could do for animal suffering. We need to fight on every front. If we run away and hide our heads to avoid seeing the sight which horrifies us, we are unworthy of the compassion that has been granted us by the Almighty.

Gandhi (2000, 5), after citing this passage, writes: “Crystal is one of the people who opened my eyes twenty years ago and showed me how to work for what I believed in instead of merely showing concern.”

I want to begin by thinking about the variety of ways that both Rogers and Gandhi invoke sight and the eyes. Rogers *sees* a horse that compels her to stay; Rogers sees, but the horse, its eyes pecked out by crows, *cannot* see; we are told we must see the sight that horrifies us; Gandhi’s eyes are opened by a story about sight, its willful absence, and its graphic, pitiable loss. This centrality of sight and of human witnessing of acts of violence against animals in activist narratives is a standard trope. Similar to a coming-out story, animal rights activists in India (and perhaps elsewhere) stake their commitment to a way of life based on one critical moment after which nothing can ever be the same. I argue in this essay that animal rights activists describe this critical moment as an intimate event in which the sight of a suffering animal, the locking of eyes between human and nonhuman, inaugurates a bond demanding from the person a life of responsibility. That event is uniquely *intimate* because it occurs between two singular beings—because based on the locking of eyes, the human’s knowledge is not of all animals in general, but of this animal, at this moment. The moment is uniquely intimate, too, because it expands ordinary understandings of the self and its possible social relations. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2006, 179) puts it, an intimate event “exfoliates the social skin.”

This article has two main objectives. First, I address how people come to act on behalf of animals in India. In doing so, I sketch moral biographies of action and inaction. These biographies connect with my second objective, to examine the sensorium of political engagement between humans and animals. Why this emphasis on sight, why the valorization of the witness? While I suggest that the event of intimacy between human and animal has the potential to blow the conceit of humanity apart, another reading is possible: that the act of intimacy, insofar as it relies on the witnessing human subject, constructs the animal as theoretical, as a mere object in the autobiography of the woman who sees and consequently acts (Derrida 2008, 82). Does animal activism thus reproduce the supposed value of *human* being, a valuation that underlies the mass exploitation of animals in the first place, a reproduction of what Agamben (2004) calls “the lethal and bloody logic” of the anthropological machine, which functions on the perpetual differentiation of human and its other? Or is that reading itself a sign of humanism’s triumph—is seeing humanism everywhere only a capitulation to its colonization of imagination and thought?<sup>2</sup> If so, what would it mean to believe that in the

ethical encounter between human and animal a woman can indeed *become* an animal, not theoretically but carnally, morally, spiritually? This essay engages with the sensorium of animal activism and its life inside and *outside* the anthropological machine. But first, some context.

### MORAL BIOGRAPHIES, AFFECTIVE HISTORIES

Animal activism in India is inseparable from a larger affective history of liberalism, a history that, in turn, is deeply entwined with the history and politics of empire (Gandhi 2006).<sup>3</sup> If we were to simply replace *horse* or *animal* in Rogers's recollections with the phrase "the female child" or "the Hindu woman," her memoir would read no differently, for example, than Katherine Mayo's 1927 anti-India polemic, *Mother India*—a book that, in its stark portrayal of everyday acts of astonishing violence against women and girls, served as a powerful tool of empire, arguing for the need to stay fast in India to protect its most vulnerable from barbarity and neglect (Sinha 2000). And indeed, animal welfare in contemporary India—like pro-women reform in colonial India—is largely driven by foreigners. The biggest animal shelters and NGOs (except for Maneka Gandhi's) are founded by foreigners who came to India on holiday or for work and found themselves, like Rogers, compelled by the sight of suffering to stay there, or at least to try and transform the place from afar.

Two British women helped catalyze the first High Court judgment in India prohibiting the killing of stray dogs.<sup>4</sup> They had taken it upon themselves to sterilize dogs, seeing that the consequence of their overpopulation on Goan beaches was to be killed by dog shooters who would exchange the tail of a defeated dog at the municipal office for a sum of rupees. When the women found out that the city had committed a mass culling of dogs they had already sterilized (and who would thus not be guilty of begetting more), they set in motion a series of events that would lead to the founding of People for Animals, Goa, and the building of a landmark court case. And then there is another Briton, PETA's (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) Ingrid Newkirk, a renegade and murder fantasy of carnivores and vivisectionists everywhere (see Specter 2003). The Indian animal holds a special place in Newkirk's heart, in part because she was raised there. As an adult she returned to India to walk the trail of horror that cattle are made to walk, the roughly nine-hundred miles from Gujarat—one of the highest dairy-producing states, but one where cow protectionists have secured the illegality of slaughter—to West Bengal, one of the only two states in India in which cow slaughter is legal. (The other is Kerala. Both are Communist Party strongholds.)<sup>5</sup>

Newkirk's journey was the basis for a film on India's leather industry but perhaps more important, it is the reason that Newkirk will never quit India. In 2000 she set up a PETA office in Bombay with which she has daily involvement, an office headed by a thirty-eight-year-old American-born Indian woman. Numerically, the passionate involvement of such foreigners is a boon for animal welfare; culturally and socially, however, it makes for a liability. Critics of animal rights have every reason and many a chance to paint the movement as a product of foreign meddling and elite interests, and as ultimately working against the economic well-being of the nation.

Of course, a homegrown animal welfare politics exists too: cow protection or *gauseva*. But even this is only superficially homegrown. Cow protection was conceived as an anticolonial endeavor and thus emerged in an unequal encounter with the foreign (Pandey 1983). And in any case, cow protection does not really constitute a politics of animal welfare: it exclusively concerns the cow, and the cow as a symbol separating those who eat or slaughter them (Christians, Muslims, and lower-caste Hindus) from those who do not (higher-caste Hindus) (Yang 1980). Because of this deep cultural association of animal protection with caste violence and Hindu nationalism, people (including the human rights activists I have worked with [Dave 2012b]) will express their cosmopolitanism and progressive politics in part by deliberately and ostentatiously eating meat, a performance in the "aggressively visible public theater" that is eating in colonial and postcolonial India (Roy 2010, 8). In their eyes animal activists are, at best, elite and out of touch with important human issues and, at worst, harboring high-caste, anti-Muslim sentiments. This perspective is influenced by the faces of animal welfare groups, many of which do belong to high-caste or non-Muslim middle-class people (as is common across the NGO sector in India). But it is also blind to the fact that the field workers and volunteers span the demographic spectrum, and that those who bring animals into clinics are often the poor, those who share the streets with so-called stray animals (Dave 2012a). The animal rights sector, defensive, responds to these perceptions in various ways. One organization asked a Muslim vegan activist to pose for a poster holding a dog (Muslims are widely considered to think of dogs as unclean). In case that was too subtle, they also asked him to wear a skullcap. The Indian Vegetarian Congress, founded in the 1950s, boasts that it has on occasion given its college paper prize to Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Try as some animal activists might, however, to distance themselves from Hindu, high-caste, antiminority politics, rumblings about Muslim butchers, the slaughterhouse's "stench of death" (reminiscent of language about Dalit leatherworkers),

and beef-eating Christians continue to sound from within animal rights organizations.<sup>7</sup>

Animal rights activism finds challenges in India's changing economy as well. The conspicuous consumption of animal products, from leather to meats, has increased among elite and upwardly mobile groups during India's global economic rise. This rise itself has, in part, been accomplished through the massive trade in animals, with India becoming the biggest exporter of leather in Asia and the biggest producer of milk in the world (FIAPO 2011). But under whose watch did India become such a renowned specialist in the mass exploitation of cows? Well, of course—because every good story needs irony—under the party of cow protectionists and antislaughter campaigners, the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And who but India's foremost animal activist and former *bahu* of the Indian National Congress Party is a star politician of the BJP?<sup>8</sup> Of course, Maneka Gandhi.

Gandhi's moral biography is as captivating and mercurial as she is. She was not yet sixteen when, at a cousin's party, a man in a white kurta and red scarf approached her. The line at the buffet was long and the man did not want to wait, so he asked her if she would share her plate of food with him, particularly her lamb; she declined.<sup>9</sup> And so did Maneka Anand first meet Sanjay Gandhi, son of the prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and grandson of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru: over a plate of lamb.

Maneka, who was so apolitical that she did not know who Sanjay was, would marry into one of the world's great political dynasties and, as it happened, into a family of animal and environment protectionists. Nehru had made it his personal mission as prime minister to pass the Prevention of Cruelty Against Animals Act (PCA) in 1960. The bill was first drafted by Member of Parliament Rukmini Devi, a legendary dancer mentored politically by Annie Besant and whose philosophy about human-animal relations was shaped by the Theosophical Society in Madras. Nehru asked Devi if he could introduce her bill himself because, as he told her, the issue was too dear to him and to the country to let fail. Devi acquiesced, but to unexpected consequences (Krishna and Gandhi 2005). The central points of Devi's version of the PCA were to prevent animal experimentation and slaughter for food; Nehru's version—the one passed and still in effect—made animal experimentation and food the two major *exceptions* to cruelty law, concerned as he and his advisers were with modernity and development. (Or, as some animal activists explain in conspiratorial tones, Nehru was pro-Muslim and aimed to protect butchers and slaughterhouses.) His daughter, Indira

Gandhi, sponsored progressive environmental legislation and was known for her ambitious conservation initiative, Project Tiger. Her politics were deeply felt. A visiting dignitary had given Gandhi a tiger skin rug, head and all. Likely under some adviser's suggestion, she displayed the rug in her drawing room. Writing a letter to her elder son, Rajiv, who was studying at Cambridge, Gandhi mourned the life of that tiger in two handwritten pages. "Someday," she wrote, "I hope people will shoot only cameras, and not guns, in the jungle."<sup>10</sup>

Animal lovers perhaps, but they were meat-eaters all, the Nehru-Gandhis, until one night at dinner when Maneka began pontificating about the treatment of animals. She was just putting a spoonful of meaty soup to her mouth when Sanjay said, "How can you go on about animal cruelty while eating meat? Stop eating meat or shut up." And like that, an epiphany. So obvious to her was her hypocrisy that she dropped the spoon that very instant, the soup scalding her wrist. "See?" she said to me as she pulled up the sleeve of her kurta; "the scar is still there."<sup>11</sup> I will return to this: the wound as trace, the scar as birthmark (Ahmed 2004, 27).

That same year, the year she turned eighteen, she asked her husband for some property under an overpass in South Delhi, which he gave her as a birthday gift. Gandhi in turn gave it to a friend, who started an animal shelter called Friendicoes. "So that was the beginning of your activism?" I asked. She laughed. "What a stupid beginning! My husband was the boss of this city. My mother-in-law was the Prime Minister of India. And I asked for a shop under a flyover. This is one of my problems. And it was one of my husband's problems too. Everybody talks about how wicked he was, but the truth is that he was just young. He had no idea what power he had. Neither of us did."<sup>12</sup>

People do talk about his wickedness. It is some sort of awful irony (once again) that he led a mass sterilization program of India's poor during his mother's autocratic Emergency regime in 1975–1977 (see Tarlo 2003), anecdotally aided by Maneka Gandhi who is responsible for instituting the increasingly popular ABC program to sterilize stray dogs. Since her husband's death in a plane crash in 1980, and her banishment from home and party at the hands of her mother-in-law shortly after (see Singh 2003), she has devoted herself to animals, founding India's largest animal rights organization, People for Animals. She exploits her name for all it is worth: "I thank god every day," she told me once, "for making me a Gandhi." She works seven days a week from morning to night, usually sitting behind a cluttered desk, wearing plain cotton *salwar kameez* (never silk, never wool), thin from years of wear, advocating for cows, pigs, dogs, cats, donkeys,

and chickens by writing weekly newspaper columns, lobbying fellow parliament members, and threatening over the phone to have people beaten, hanged upside down in their underwear, killed, maimed, and disappeared. Given her history, nobody takes these as idle threats. Putting her violence aside if possible—much of which is idle threat—Gandhi is tireless in her labors. The heavy bags under her eyes, the softening body, the more frequent battles with illness—all stand as testaments to the strains of a passion that will not let her go. “Why must you work so hard?” I asked her once while on a doctor-mandated walk. “Aren’t you worried about the consequences, the enemies you make, the stress?”

It turns out I had asked the wrong question; *she* has nothing to do with it. She answered that she was “a machine that is designed to do this, exactly this, only this. It is a machine so sensitive,” she continued, “that its skin literally *prickles* with another’s pain. But there is no inside to the machine. There is just this skin.” *There is no inside. There is just this skin.* What Gandhi pointed out to me was the limitation of my worldview, my assumption that she was a subject with volition, one who could stop and start at will. Perhaps she was once such a subject, but the day the soup scalded her skin she became something new: she *became subject* to the world, rather than insisting on *being a subject* in it. At the heart of this transformation lay a moment of radical humility, and her guiding principle: surrender. The activists she takes on as protégés are few, for they must be hardy sorts with thick skin as well as the kind that prickles, and they must share with Gandhi one thing, that “in the face of that which is bigger than you, stronger than you, you give yourself over to it, you *surrender*.” The universe is such a thing—bigger, stronger—and what Gandhi pushed me to see is that the readiness to be transformed, even if by an unrelenting stream of stimuli—painful, god-awful—is not an act of extraordinary courage but the only thing that makes any sense. We are all bound to lose, standing up to the world. The only way to survive is to give ourselves over, to trust that we will be alternately battered and buoyed. And survive she must, in order to keep “sticking my fingers into all the holes in the dam.” This sounds futile, but in her mind, and to the activists she trains, so is the notion of the rational actor, of someone who changes the world at will. And if everything is futile, including our very being, then what is so terrible about working in futility? And work she does.

### THE PERPETUAL WITNESS

So I was surprised when she said to me one day, from behind her desk, wearing a tense, world-weary expression: “I only wish there were a slaughter-

house next door. To witness that violence, to hear those screams . . . I would *never* be able to rest.”<sup>13</sup> As far as I could tell she never rested anyway, even without piercing screams to keep her pulse racing and her eyes open. She never rested, nor did the others: Abodh, the director of Welfare for Stray Dogs (WSD), whose personal cell phone is the default animal emergency line for all of Bombay and who has not had an uninterrupted night of sleep in fifteen years and whose wife, however kind, is running out of patience; Abodh’s fieldworker, Dipesh, who treats animals on the streets six days a week, voluntarily heals his own neighborhood animals on Sundays, and in his spare time—such as it is—works another job to keep his ailing parents alive; Maya, who finally got engaged but had no time for love, and so lost it. All of them have witnessed something that allows them no respite; all, like Gandhi, once transformed are now forever compelled by something that, on the face of it, usurps their very (well-) being. And so I want to explore this thing called witnessing, specifically three things about it: first, the idea of witnessing as distinct from merely seeing; second, how witnessing requires a disciplined presence, or the witness’s *thereness*; and third, the importance of *movement* in the witnessing of violence, both a movement *toward* the subject of intimacy and *away* from the self and its protective skin.

To witness, as Rogers and Gandhi each have invoked the term, means to see in a manner that is present, to root themselves when they might rather run or turn away. The same stubborn presence characterizes voyeurism of horror, but it differs from witnessing in two crucial ways. In witnessing and being present to pain as these activists describe it, they seek to place themselves in a situation in which they could—if brave enough—change the events that they are framed and marked by (Das 2007). To witness is to be implicated and culpable in an event not at all inexorable. Further, a voyeur heightens the affective experience of being alive in his or her own skin (“I have survived this moment and now *I* feel euphoric”); in witnessing, by contrast, that skin is shed, so that something in the person ceases to exist after the event is over. The fiction of the self is blown apart.

Or is it? Maybe the better question is: must it be?

I am suggesting an understanding of witnessing that blows the self apart, but witnessing can create truth as much as it can explode it, can concern the safely encased human self as much as the radically exfoliated one. Consider *witness* not as the thing one does but as the imperative. “Witness,” says René Descartes (qtd. in Derrida 2008, 77), “the fact that the beasts have less reason than men . . . that they have no reason at all.” This is the other meaning of witness,



witnessing as “we see that,” witnessing as an appeal to evidence presumed to be commonly shared, witnessing—because of our privileged linking of ocularity to reason—that demands that each be in lockstep with the others who see. In witnessing, vision is not always singularly intimate; it is its opposite—*common sense*. That seems reason enough to be skeptical of the privileging of sight, and of the politics of witnessing.

Jacques Derrida (2008) reminds us of another reason to be wary. Witnessing, he says, is autobiographical, it is proof that I am, that we are. The animal is *objectively staged* for this purpose, it is seen but does not itself see, such as the animal in Descartes’s discourse when he renders it an automaton, appealing to a man who witnesses an animal that does not see him in turn. This is the animal that exists as theoretical spectacle, an object for the human that says, “I am, because I *see that*.” (“See that” here has two meanings: I see that thing, and I see that this is true.) Derrida (2008, 82) calls the witnessed animal the “spectacle for a specular subject.” That specular subject becomes the subject he or she is in the act of seeing, but *not* through the act of being reflected back in the animal’s gaze. This is the Levinasian animal, the one that does not have a face capable of compelling a relationship of ethical obligation (Levinas 2004; Calarco 2008, 55–78).

That is the Levinasian animal, but what kind of animal is Crystal Rogers’s horse? The one with crows tearing the flesh off its meatless back and with bleeding sockets from which those crows have already pecked out its eyes? Does *this* animal have a face? Is this animal a theoretical spectacle, objectively staged for Rogers’s story of “I am?” I don’t know. That animal senses Rogers running toward it, and in turn, it turns to “face” Rogers. The animal, in other words, *responds*. Rogers is transformed, recognizing in herself an ethical responsibility at the moment of seeing the animal other. I have a hard time seeing her as only a specular subject. The specular subject becomes such through an act of differentiation owed to an ocularcentric logic of sameness and difference: “Because I see that (“see that” in both senses of seeing that thing and seeing reason), that is not me.” The specular subject, further, can only see himself reflected in his own gaze; the animal’s gaze cannot reflect to him his soul (Derrida 2008, 82). Rogers is not that specular subject because she, I think, *does* see her soul reflected in the gaze of the animal: but that soul, like the sockets of the animal’s eyes, is empty. The witnessing subject, in this case, *is* violently stripped away: revealed to be, and becoming, emptiness—the emptiness that, Giorgio Agamben (2004, 92) argues, is the nothing-space between human and animal, the space of ontological vulnerability.

And yet we cannot take this nothingness too far. As [Veena Das \(2007\)](#) reminds us, the witness of violence is only a witness because she survives it—because she has witnessed, in fact, she has an *obligation to live*. Recall Gandhi, who knows she must survive to keep working, and who knows that to survive she has no choice but to surrender. But she survives not as what she once was, before she became a perpetual witness. The scar she still wears from the night of the soup is indeed, as [Sarah Ahmed \(2004, 27\)](#) would suggest, a birthmark, a reminder of what she became: *just skin*. To witness, then, might best be understood as a radical interpenetration of life and death: to exercise a disciplined presence to violence that opens up a death that then compels a new kind of responsible life in a previously unimaginable skin. In the case of animal activists, it is a skin also inhabited by the animal.

Carmelia Satija, a middle-aged Hindu animal rights activist in Delhi does not appear, on the face of it, to wear a skin unusual for a person of her social position. I first met her three summers ago while trying to track down an animal rights organization called KARE (Kindness to Animals and Respect for Environment). The address I had located through a website appeared erroneous. Instead of an NGO office or animal shelter, I found myself in front of Rio Grande, a small store with an armed guard in an upscale marketplace in South Delhi. It turned out that Satija was both the owner of the shop and the founding trustee of KARE, now defunct. After learning from her sales clerk that I was there, she drove to her shop in a black SUV to meet me. We greeted each other and she led me through the store to her second-floor office, where she offered me a seat across from her at her desk. She has an oval face, long black hair, and deep-set eyes. Her movements are elegant, jewelry quietly jangling, her accent clipped, the smell of her perfume mixing with the strong jasmine incense wafting through her shop.

“So,” she began, “does this really interest you, this activism of mine?” I answered that it did, and she, unbelieving at first, began a slow reveal, bringing out reports, pamphlets, court filings, and photographs, all filed away behind store financials and inventories. (The basement of her house held much more, entire shelving units worth.) “Thirty years of my life,” she said, her eyes a mix of guilt and sadness. When I asked her to tell me about those years she began with images.<sup>14</sup>

The slaughterhouse footage she had in her possession, Satija said, was “more valuable to me than gold.” She continued: “Those images reminded me. Of how horrible the world is. Of the pain we cause. Even without watching the videos,

just knowing that they were in the cabinet served a purpose. They would never let me stop.” She then told me about her illicit visits to the Idgah slaughterhouse in New Delhi, whose horrors she filmed and later had shown on the state-owned broadcast service, Doordarshan (an effort by the government, no doubt, to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment under the guise of compassion). The Idgah slaughterhouse has a capacity to process 2,500 animals per day for meat, leather, and by-products, but instead it butchers upward of 13,000 animals daily, around 3,000 buffaloes and 10,000 goats.<sup>15</sup> The animals are brought in from miles around the city, thrown from the trucks into heaps by their limbs, most with their legs already broken and some crushed to death from the journey. Boys and men begin the process of hacking and skinning the animals with rusty knives, the butchers barefoot and shin-deep in blood and shit. There are few sights more heart-breaking—or for those less sentimental than I, more ironic—than of sickly cows eating from the nearly one thousand pounds of cattle excrement, body parts, and clotted blood that the Idgah slaughterhouse dumps at a nearby landfill, a playground for kite-flying slum children, every day.



Figure 1. Death by rubbish. (Photo courtesy of Animal Aid, India)

Telling me about her visits to Idgah, Satija continued: "It's not just the sights that you always remember. Worse even than the looks in the animals' eyes, worse than the screams, was the *stench* of death. It's not only the stench of blood and gore, it's the stench of *death*. Even now, I wake up in the middle of the night with that stench in my nostrils." The value for Satija of witnessing slaughter is that it forces her always to move, to stave off rest and the pretenses that enable it. The activism, then, compelled by witnessing (which, as I have suggested, is partly defined by a disciplined staying put in the face of horror) is also a kind of *running*—fervent movement away from the bounded self that only impotently remembers, and toward that which suffers on account of one's own life. This defining dynamic of witnessing as staying put in the face of death only to then constantly move away from our own impotence and toward the other in a relation of intimacy that thins the human skin and thickens relationality, is one described by many of the people who have populated my narrative. Recall how Rogers *runs toward* the dying horse and keeps moving until her death thirty-five years later, homeless and almost penniless; Gandhi anticipates never resting while in the earshot of the nightmarish cacophony of death; the stench of death in Satija's nostrils bolts her awake from the tenuous refuge of sleep. These relationships among witnessing, animal activism, and the impossibility of respite also come into play in people's decisions *not* to involve themselves in the lives of animals. A woman in her early twenties explained to me why she did not volunteer at an animal shelter at home in Chennai, saying that she was "deathly afraid of caring too much." Is any other politics, I wonder, constrained by such a mortal fear of caring too much, of the heart bursting, the skin thinning, of not being able to rest again? Is any other politics so limited, that is, by the fear of intimacy, or so determined by the witnessed events that create it?

Satija's witnessing of the suffering of animals did more than force her to labor ceaselessly; that witnessing, I want to stress, constituted an intimate event in which her own social skin would be opened up, stripped away, and remade, thickening worldly relations. In her own words, such witnessing forced her—would force us all—to *become* the animal in pain. "To realize the suffering of animals," she said to me, "requires you to *become an animal that talks*. Because they cannot [talk], that becomes my responsibility." I want to think now, through the rubrics of humanism and its others, about what it means for Satija to "become an animal that talks."

## BECOMING ANIMAL

Povinelli (2006) elaborates a history of the concept of intimacy in post-Enlightenment Western thought. Intimacy here is the freely chosen bond between sovereign subjects, a foundational fiction of the autological society that sets itself apart from the genealogical—those incapable of intimacy because their bonds are already chosen for them in advance along such lines as tribe, caste, custom, and kin. What interests me about this material on animals and witnessing in urban India is, in part, how it contributes to the project of destabilizing that fiction by showing how an act of intimacy—intimate because singular, because it exfoliates the social skin, because it expands the boundaries of possible relationality—both exceeds and even resists sovereignty. For one, the animal subject is brought into its intimate relation with a human *through* its unfreedom. Second, by entering into intimacy with an animal in pain, the activist seeks not to be more free, but to render herself even more deeply subject to unequal relations of obligation and responsibility (see Mahmood 2005): in fact, to *surrender*.

But the intimacy of human and animal, by showing that intimacy is other than a freely chosen bond between two sovereign (and thus presumably *human*) subjects, does not only explode the species divide. Intimacy also reintroduces and stabilizes that chasm. As Satija describes it, realizing the suffering of animals makes imperative a simultaneous sublimation *and deployment* of the self as a sovereign human subject to and for the needs of the unfree other. The activist simultaneously must become the animal (her own skin shed in sublimation) and must hyper-embody herself as human by doing precisely that which defines what it is to be human: to speak, here, to “give voice” for that unfree other that cannot speak, the witness safely encased in her human self. Satija exemplifies how voice itself emerges in the “zone between two deaths” (Das 2007, 61–62)—here, the death of the animal and the death of the man the witness was in the moment before he witnessed. But the voice that emerges in the zone between two deaths does not only cry against injustice; it also calls forth the very cleavage between human and animal that enables that injustice to thrive at all.

Or does it? Maybe the better question is: must it?

An obvious and eminently reasonable analysis of Satija’s vision of becoming an animal is the one I just made (see also Derrida 2008; Ticktin 2012): that despite its aim to break from violence, animal activism only reproduces the war between species through its anthropocentric humanism. But then again, that is just one interpretation, and perhaps its damning flaw is precisely its eminent reasonability—a kind of approach to the world that, too, finds its foundation and

value in the “bloody and lethal” tradition of metaphysical humanism (Agamben 2004). And so what if I suggested that my very assumption of anthropocentric humanism in Satija’s desire to “become an animal that talks” may well be the problem here: that my assumption of humanism results from *my* being locked in a closed, binary logic of representation in which (1) I know what human and animal are, and (2) I know that they are either different or that they are the same. Instead of hearing in her claim, “I = it” or “it = me,” why am I not hearing “I + it + b + z = something you have never thought before?”<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps it would be useful to linger on her use of the word *becoming*. Satija did not say she wanted to *be* an animal, but that she wanted to *become* one. The difference between being and becoming is similar to that between witnessing and specular subjects, a difference that lies, to use Brian Massumi’s words, between rendering the self molar or dissolving the self into supermolecularity. We are all capable of becoming-other, Massumi (1992, 94) tells us; all we have to do is want it. We have to *want* to escape our bodily and social limitations, a desire that may be sparked by politics, by philosophy, by witnessing. But that desire may also be conflicted: oscillating between the desire for molarity (which manifests in being something other—say, an animal that talks—and is administered through the logic of sameness and difference) and the desire for supermolecularity (which does not, strictly speaking, ever manifest: it is only becoming and *hyperdifferentiation*). I do not know the nature of Satija’s desires, but I am willing to say that my immediate unwillingness to accept that she does become animal in a way that is disruptive rather than productive of anthropocentric humanism unjustly limits in advance the potential effects of her, my, and the animal’s becoming.

I never saw Satija in the field—never saw her becoming-animal with my own eyes and therefore cannot say “I see that” her becoming is true—so let me move for a moment to something I did witness. In the summer of 2013 I spent a week with an American family, the Abrams-Meyers, who had moved from Seattle to a rocky, hilly village outside Udaipur, in the northwest Indian state of Rajasthan. They were Jim, Erika, and Claire, and when I stepped out of the Udaipur train station and gave the name of the village I wanted to get to, the rickshaw driver said, “Erika *ka ghar?*” (Erika’s house?), which Erika had told me might happen, but which still tickled me, this indication of their local celebrity. The driver brought me to their gate and the sound of the engine brought Claire to the door, followed closely by Erika, who was quite literally flapping with excitement. They were all abnormally tall, these Americans. Jim, aged sixty, is

a sturdy man who wears Dickies pants and a thin gray T-shirt and heavy work boots. He rides to their shelter every morning on a Royal Enfield motorcycle, and when I sat behind him I was transfixed by the deep creases on his sun-reddened neck. He was once a professor of literature. Claire, aged twenty-two, dresses simply and wears a bandana to keep the hair off a face beautiful in its classic symmetry, including a striking Roman nose dotted with a stud. She was twelve when they left Seattle and has not been formally schooled since, which might in fact account for her extraordinary curiosity and wisdom about the world. Erika: Well, Erika, I have to say, is a lot like Big Bird. And I can say that because I know she does not mind, for she has nothing against either birds or muppets, and is quite aware that she is tall, wild, and gangly. Erika, aged fifty-nine, almost always wears saris, but while I was there the family was moving their animal shelter to a larger site, which involved actually carrying animals in their arms, one by one, from a van into large outdoor enclosures. So I usually saw her in random house pants and kurtas, her glasses sometimes on her head, sometimes her head covered with a bandana that she otherwise wears around her neck. I think I will always remember the sight of her, slightly disheveled, slightly mad looking, but somehow calm, and everything revolving around her in a steady, necessary orbit. She is carrying a bucket full of water even though it has been a very long and hot day, and the dogs trail behind her and she is harried but full of love. And I can see why an activist named Jaivardan says Erika “is like a god” to him, and another activist named Rohit calls her “the mother of animals,” and why Timmie Kumar, who directs Jaipur’s renowned shelter, Help in Suffering, and has a cult following herself, told me she “fell to the ground and wept when [she] first saw Erika with the animals.” I know that sounds overly dramatic but somehow it is not when you see this woman rolling in the dirt with salivating, joyous, romping three-legged dogs. I wish I had fallen to the ground in tears myself.

One of the things about Erika, as with any witness, is her mix of movement and stillness. She walked me to the large animals section of the shelter, populated mostly by donkeys, goats, and cows, with a couple of paralyzed pigs. We came upon a large lump on the ground, covered by burlap, and then I saw the hooves and tail showing from under it. I came around and saw the nearly closed eyelids, the body rising and falling with laborious breath: it was a dying cow, her neck bent unnaturally. Because of Rajasthan’s antislaughter law, Erika could not euthanize her. She had been dying for days. Erika had assumed that the previous



day was going to be the cow's last, and she told me what they do at times like those. Erika calls the workers over, one by one or perhaps two at a time, and she asks them to stop whatever work they are doing and just be there with the animal. She got down on the ground, next to this burlap and flesh, and demonstrated to me. "Just be silent next to its dying body, stroking its head if they feel they can, cradling it, kissing it, or just sitting there, body to body, life to life, death to death, soul to soul. Say you're sorry that it's leaving this world, if you feel moved to say that, say you're sorry that it lived in a world like this, if that's what you want to say. Whatever you do, just be there." In these moments of being-with, she added, the social boundaries between humans, too, fall apart, when they *are* together, all from their varying backgrounds of caste and race, with their butts equally on the shit- and piss-strewn ground and their hands on the crusted body of an animal in pain, sometimes crying, sometimes stoic, sometimes calm, but all the time, and all of them, *there*, facing the boundary between life and death that will someday hunt us all down, regardless of the skin we wear.

### THESE ARE BECOMINGS, ALL

I turned to Erika to answer a question that Satija had provoked: can we become animal, become other, in a way that is disruptive rather than productive of anthropocentric humanism? Or to put it differently: can we become something other than the safely encased human self? I have no doubt that I watched some of Erika die in that instant, that I witnessed her becoming-other through her surrender to becoming-death. I simply would not feel right reducing that moment to a reproduction of anthropocentrism, though surely one could make that argument if they wanted to. But more important, I want to suggest that it does not matter *what* she became; she affected me, forever, just as she affects all those who enter her orbit. For the entire point of becoming, in the Deleuzian sense, is not to go from one thing to another, but to be a phenomenon, an event, an act of bordering in which both (original) categories are revealed to be infinitely other than what they are. Becoming is pure effectuation, only the effect of affectively redefining the places we started from: in this particular case, woman and animal. In another case it was man and rat. This is from [Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's \(1987, 259\) \*A Thousand Plateaus\*](#):

When Hofmannsthal contemplates the death throes of a rat, it is in him that the animal "bares his teeth at his monstrous fate." This is not a feeling of pity, as he makes clear; still less an identification. It is a composition of



speeds and affects . . . it makes the rat become a thought, a feverish thought in the man, at the same time that the man becomes a rat gnashing its teeth in its death throes. The rat and the man are in no way the same thing . . . but are expressed . . . in an affectability that is no longer that of subjects. *Unnatural participation*.<sup>17</sup>

Becoming; unnatural participation; turning the self *not* into another kind of self, but only into a “question-machine” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 259). Social movements, in this sense, are full of becomings: they are defined and made by them. The phrase “unnatural participation,” in particular—because of its echoes, I suppose, of sodomy law and sexual policing, but also of the emergent and perverse—takes me from the animal to the queer, to a pivotal moment in the history of queer organizing in India. (This might seem quite apart, but the queer and the animal have many connections between them [see Chen 2012; Halberstam 2011; Haraway 1991].) In 1998, a film called *Fire*, about the love affair between two sisters-in-law in a middle-class New Delhi home, was released throughout India. What followed were violent public clashes instigated by right-wing activists who claimed that the film was an abomination: there *are* no lesbians in India, they said. Lesbians responded with three simple words: “Indian and Lesbian” (Dave 2011).

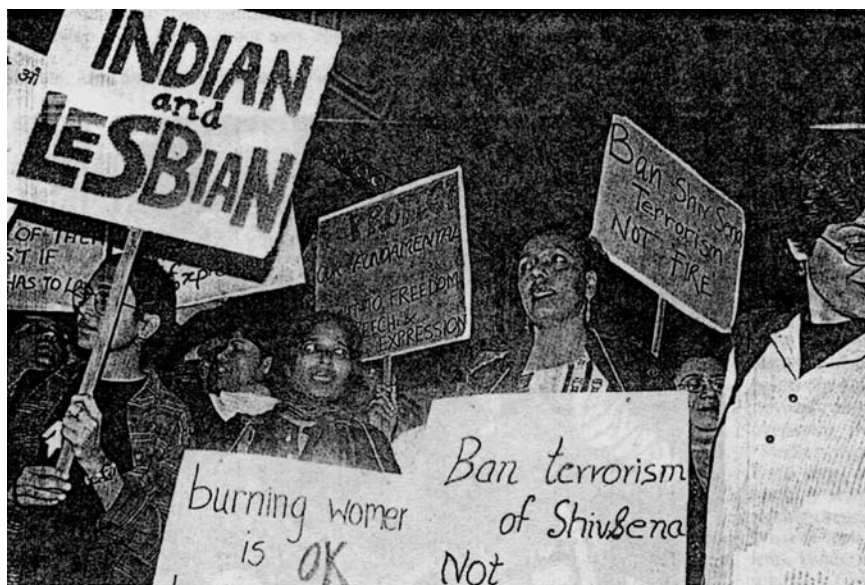


Figure 2. Becoming Indian. (Photo from *Times of India*)

Is this so unlike Satija's claim that she becomes an animal? Was not "Indian and Lesbian" an act of becoming par excellence? Those words were certainly, when first uttered, as improbable as a wealthy, middle-aged Hindu woman saying, "I am an animal." The very identity of India, after all, rested on its exclusion of queer, and the very identity of queer rested on its exclusion from citizenship (Bacchetta 1999), mirroring the mutual exclusions of human subject and animal abject. "Indian and Lesbian," during the riotous weeks that followed that utterance, was indeed a becoming, an effectuation, a question-machine: affectively redefining dominant categories of social understanding, birthing inbred monstrosities where there was once, so we thought, a simple, gaping abyss between this and that. Lesbians became Indian as blacks had become men in another radical becoming in Memphis in 1968, as the sanitation workers' strike gave rise to a mass of signs that also marked a singular becoming, this time with four words instead of three: "I am a Man."

These are becomings, all: a lesbian becoming Indian, a black man becoming Man, a woman becoming animal. But putting it this way, there are at least two differences between the first two and the last one. The first two begin with a movement from the particular (molecular) to the general (molar), while the last one begins with a movement from the general-particular (human—but still only woman) to the particular. The first two, in other words, are majoritarian, the last one minoritarian. This first difference can probably explain the second, which



Figure 3. Becoming man. (Photo by Ernest C. Withers, *I Am A Man*, Sanitation Workers Strike, Memphis, Tennessee, March 28, 1968)

is that the first two becomings we believe (for who, really, would not want to *be* more, to be a man?), while the last one most of us do not (for who, really, would want to *be* less, to become an animal?).

And so what is it for me, or anyone, to critically question Satija's becoming-animal? I question, in part, the motivation and effects of Satija's "animal that talks," describing it as more humanism. I call on the signs from our maiden conversation: her references to mythology to suggest that Hindus, perhaps more than others, are inclined to compassion; her use of the phrase "stench of death," unleashing a chain of references in my own mind that takes me quickly to a history of caste violence (though it could just as well take me to Omaha, Nebraska, where they use the same phrase to speak of slaughter [Pachirat 2011, 30]); her wealth and comforts, which might signal to me a remove from struggle. But what do I know? What do I know of her heart other than what she tells me of it, and she tells me that she becomes an animal because she has witnessed an animal in pain. But then I think, "Can it really be so?" A lesbian can be an Indian because she already is; a black man can be a man because he already is; but Satija cannot be an animal because I know what an animal is and an animal is not this bejeweled woman with a daughter in the Ivy League. Throughout all of this, I *know*. But what if we were to surrender to the spirit of becoming?<sup>18</sup> To truly, carnally enact a critique of Cartesianism by allowing other facets of the sensorium to reign? What if we were to become Satija, to see what she sees, to experience what inspires her to shed her skin and become the animal in pain, the animal that writhes at night, a smell in her nostrils, a flash in his mind's eye, a scream neither past nor present but *here*, in her bed, calling from below—to make her, and what she sees, a feverish thought coursing through our flesh? Could we feel, then, that she is not becoming or failing to become a subject, but becoming an *event*, an operation on the categories of thought and action that we hold on to, demanding that we not *be* something new, but let go of what we tell ourselves that we and our interlocutors are, so that we can, sometimes, like her when she tries, become?

It would be to be like Maneka Gandhi, to give ourselves over. It would be to be like Timmie Kumar, to come apart in the face of something extraordinary. It would be to be like Erika, to put arms around the body of a dying animal, ear to its flesh, and be filled with the pulse of its enormous, failing heart. It would be to feel more ourselves and yet be ever less certain, and more curious, about what that even means. And is that not the point of all our multispecies ethnographic explorations (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 546, 559)? Is that not what

it means to do an anthropology—not of *anthropos* as we believe we know it, but of life (Kohn 2007)?

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Toward the end of my first visit with Satija, she began showing me images from a collection of photographs. As we came upon one of a dog covered in maggots with a mangled leg, I noticed her wet eyes. It reminded me of something Frida Kahlo once wrote: “They say there are two things that don’t mean anything: a dog’s limp, and a woman’s tears.” In her witnessing, in her intimacies, and in her becomings, Satija tries and fails and tries again to make those things matter after all.

### ABSTRACT

*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 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 her a life of responsibility. I argue in this article that this moment of witnessing constitutes an intimate event in tethering human to nonhuman, expanding ordinary understandings of the self and its possible social relations, potentially blowing the conceit of humanity apart. But I also consider another reading, which is how this act of intimacy exacerbates the species divide as the witness hyperembodies herself as human, “giving voice” for the animal other which cannot speak. Throughout the article, I consider how posthumanist perspectives might trouble both these interpretations and ask what it would mean to take seriously the animal activist’s “becoming animal.” [animals; activism; posthumanism; India]*

### NOTES

*Acknowledgments* This essay began with an invitation from Michael Lambek to participate in a panel he organized at CASCA/AES in Vancouver. I am grateful to him for that nudge. I have since presented pieces of this argument and narrative at the AAAs in New Orleans, the University of Toronto, York University, the University of Stockholm, and Azim Premji University in Bangalore, and I thank those organizers and audiences. I also thank George Mantzios, Kajri Jain, Amira Mittermaier, Joshua Barker, Anne Allison, Charles Piot, and the two anonymous reviewers. The research for this project has been funded by a multiyear grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), as well as by a fellowship from the Jackman Humanities Institute.

1. Gandhi, though presenting Rogers’s narrative as a direct quote, is actually paraphrasing Rogers. The passages about sight and the eyes are still accurate.
2. Jacques Derrida (2008) and Miriam Ticktin (2012) have revealed how animal rights politics rely on humanist values such as compassion, thereby reproducing the very distinctions between action and passivity, the noble and the mute, that underlie other

colonial and neocolonial forms of exploitation. This is an important reading of human action on behalf of animals—one I largely agree with—but I hope to show alternative ones.

3. That said, as [Leela Gandhi \(2006\)](#) shows in her *Affective Communities*, animal activism in India is also inseparable from an affective history of radicalism. Among her central figures is Mohandas K. Gandhi, the mahatma, whose vegetarianism was part of a broader fin de siècle anticolonialism that grew deep affective bonds between humans and humans, specifically whites and Indians. Indeed, part of what I demonstrate in this article is the difficulty of parsing the liberal or conservative from the radical and that it might come down to what we are and are not able (and willing) to see. Mahatma Gandhi is a good example of this ambivalence, his vegetarianism being part of a radical anticolonial pacifism as well as a masculinist politics of purity (though not one reducible to caste) (see Roy 75–115).
4. *Vinyog Parivar Trust v. Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai*, Writ Petition No. 1596, 1998.
5. I have asked activists why they think these two states allow slaughter. Slaughter in Kerala is explained through its high population of Christians. But the fact that both states have been governed by communist parties is also significant for at least four reasons: leftists tend to be staunchly humanist; as non-party feminists have long attested, they are often unwilling to recognize connections between workers' rights and other forms of inequality; in India consuming meat is associated with the working class and lower castes and is thus valorized by leftists; and finally and most obviously, slaughtering cows is a rejection of the Hindu Right.
6. E. Giridhar, interview with the author, July 8, 2011, Chennai, India.
7. Anthropological literature on animal politics in India has largely focused on its failures, violences, and hypocrisies. [Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi \(2012\)](#), for example, demonstrates that the Hindu Right's enforced pacifism toward the cow serves as the ground for its mortal violence against non-Hindus and lower castes (see also [Chigateri 2008](#)). I could not agree more. But that is not all there is to say about the politics of humans and animals in India. By telling stories from the perspective of animal activists who identify with progressive rather than conservative causes (see also [Leela Gandhi 2006](#)), and from theoretical perspectives other than that of how power reproduces itself in predictable ways, I hope to show that there are and must be other ways we conceive of human-animal engagements in India, ways that are not predetermined or fully determined by Hindu nationalism.
8. *Bahu* is Hindi for "daughter-in-law." Maneka Gandhi joined the BJP after being cast out of the Congress Party. It appears to me that this is mostly a functional arrangement (the BJP gives her a political stage for her animal activism, she gives them celebrity and a small victory over their archenemy, Sonia Gandhi), and not one based on ideological synergy.
9. This is how she told it to me, anyway. Maneka Gandhi, interview with the author, June 11, 2011, New Delhi, India. [Khushwant Singh \(2003\)](#) says that the two were inseparable all night. He also does not mention the mutton.
10. This is from a letter on display at the Indira Gandhi Memorial Museum in Delhi, India, which I visited in the summer of 2011.
11. Maneka Gandhi, interview with the author, May 29, 2008, New Delhi, India.
12. Maneka Gandhi, interview with the author, May 29, 2008, New Delhi, India.
13. This sentiment is like one expressed by Paul McCartney, Michael Pollan, or Timothy Pachirat, one that imagines glass-walled slaughterhouses that would inevitably transform our treatment of animals through horror and repugnance. [Pachirat \(2011, 242–43\)](#) in fact calls for a "politics of sight," in which activists work to render transparent the violences we systematically conceal, creating a kind of reverse panopticon. But Pachirat's work is not entirely relevant here for at least two reasons. First, the activists in this article are not concerned with motivating others to act; they are concerned foremost with disallowing complacency in themselves. Second, violence against animals in India

- is not nearly as concealed as it is in the United States, and it is more the apathy of ubiquity that is the problem than the tendency to conceal.
14. Carmelia Satija, interview with the author, June 11, 2010, New Delhi, India.
  15. *Maneka Gandhi v. Union Territory of Delhi and Others*, Civil Writ No. 2961, 1992.
  16. Or, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 263) put it, riffing off Virginia Woolf, “Five o’clock is this animal! This animal is this place! . . . That is how we need to feel.”
  17. Hugo von Hofmannsthal was an Austrian writer who published at the turn of the twentieth century. In this section of their text, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 240) discuss a number of writers who, through their “unnatural participation” beyond the human, act as “sorcerers,” able to throw the self (and an openhearted reader) into radical upheaval.
  18. In asking what it would mean to believe a phenomenon that challenges our regimes of rationality, and not merely to believe that this phenomenon is true for our interlocutors, I am interested in a long-standing debate about belief and ethnographic method, one that Paul Nadasdy (2007) recently engaged. He persuasively asks us to inhabit alternative ontologies, to believe, in his case among First Nations in the Yukon, that the animal gives itself as a gift to its hunter. I follow Nadasdy to a point, diverging to ask what it would mean to inhabit only becomings that traverse lines of sameness and difference, self and other.

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