

Anthropology Book Forum

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Naisargi N. Davé, 2023, *Indifference: On the Praxis of Interspecies Being*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 200 pp., ISBN 978-1-4780-2513-9

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In *Indifference*, Naisargi Davé offers an ethnographic study of human-animal relationships across India, examining activists, cattle farmers, animal healers, transporters, restaurant workers, and animals themselves. Drawing from Madhavi Menon's *Indifference to Difference* (2015), Davé conceptualizes indifference as "not a lack but a stance, a cultivated demeanor, that is born of the queer desire and the queer belief in an otherwise way of being" (p. 1). She further defines indifference as "a not desiring to do anything with, for, and via the difference of others" (p. 6), challenging binary understandings of care and violence while proposing forms of coexistence grounded in nonmastery rather than domination. In effect, "indifference is the posture of immersion, side by side, rather than the face to face" (p. 1). Through what she terms "idiosyncratic intuition," Davé reframes ethnography as an ethical mode of inquiry extending beyond culture, species, and conventional notions of compassion and care.

With this methodological approach, Davé structures *Indifference* through interconnected case studies of human-animal relationships across shelters, activist spaces, and abattoirs in India. In chapter 1, she examines the affective and political conditions through which animal activism emerges, critiquing cow protectionism as "only a means for fascistic violence against Dalit and Muslim minorities" (p. 16). She further argues that animals are often staged within moral frameworks as "an object for the human who says, 'I am, because I see that'" (p. 21). Chapter 2 asks why moral concern for animals is frequently experienced as repulsive, concluding that the answer lies in "fascism, on the one hand, and the affective history of European liberalism, on the other" (p. 31). Through readings of Savitri Devi, Crystal Rogers, and Rukmini Devi Arundale, Davé demonstrates how animal welfare movements become entangled with anxieties surrounding caste, nationalism, gender, and sexuality, particularly fears of "queer nonreproductivity, the hatred of women, and the fear of conversion" (p. 51).

Chapters 3 and 4 further develop Davé's ethic of indifference through discussions of contradiction, silence, and nonrelation. In chapter 3, she argues that searching for contradiction often serves "the triumph of the norm, the triumph of the way things already are" (p. 58), using examples such as killing parasites to save a cat to show how ethical inconsistencies are selectively judged. Critiquing forms of animal ethics rooted in perpetual conflict, Davé observes that activists frequently imagine "an existence that is only ever at war" (p. 72). Chapter 4 extends these concerns through a discussion of silence and subalternity in conversation with Gayatri Spivak. Rejecting portrayals of animals as helpless beings that reinforce "the imperious imperative to protection" (p. 74), Davé instead draws from Eve Meijer's concept of interspecies

civil disobedience, which “views other animals not as objects for human political activity but as activists” (p. 80). At the same time, she argues that silence itself can function politically as “the right to opacity, an ethics of nonrelation” (p. 82), culminating in “an ethos of being silent alongside . . . queer tongues” (p. 89).

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the embodied and affective dimensions of human-animal relationships through care, queerness, and touch. In chapter 5, Davé follows her interlocutor Dipesh during his routine welfare checks on community street animals, discovering that many animal caretakers forgo marriage and children in favor of interspecies care work that further queers already queered human-animal relationships. While these relationships can foster intimacy and compassion, Davé also highlights the “internecine interspecies violence” embedded within such spaces and notes that “most animalists harbor a haughty indifference toward every social issue that does not directly involve the abuse of animals” (p. 106). Chapter 6 extends these concerns through an examination of touch, which Davé—drawing from Eric Santner—describes as “ethically disinterested, indifferent, passive” (p. 108). Reflecting on Dipesh’s interactions with street animals, she argues that refusing touch becomes “an act of social and moral deletion” (p. 117), producing forms of “haptic dispersal” tied to broader systems of untouchability and exclusion (p. 124).

Chapter 7 offers a provocative examination of bestiality and permissible interspecies violence, exposing the hypocrisies surrounding sexual relations between humans and animals. Davé contrasts the condemnation of human male penetration of goats with the accepted forced penetration of farmed animals through artificial insemination, arguing that the distinction lies not in the act itself but in its social purpose: “one reproduces in the name of economy and the nation, and the other . . . stanches reproduction in the name of the social” (p. 129). She demonstrates how nonhuman animals are denied the capacity for refusal—to be worked, penetrated, or killed—while such procedures are framed as “a ‘virtuous service’ that enables cows to achieve their destiny as mothers” (p. 141). Ultimately, Davé argues that “cow protection, like the protection of Hindu women, is but a sphere of permissible violence” (p. 145).

The final chapter reflects on the “carnality” that structures the book, or “a copresence of life and death that expresses itself in an intense nowness of being” (p. 147). Revisiting her ethnographic encounters, Davé emphasizes the precarity and “No-future” existence of animals bred for slaughter, while critiquing moral frameworks surrounding meat consumption and animal welfare. She questions the logic of “cage-free” reforms when animals remain destined for death and concludes with a pig transporter’s insistence that animal exploitation will persist because “the demand to eat and kill and transport animals will always be there” (p. 164). For Davé, inevitability does not lessen the ethical urgency of these violences.

On its surface, *Indifference* appears to be written primarily for those interested in political ecology or animal studies, yet its broader inferences make it an equally engaging text for cultural anthropologists, historians, and geographers. Davé is deeply committed to situating a history of India into the philosophical inquiries of an ethics of indifference. Davé centers her ethnographic storytelling such that the voices of those she is in conversation with—both human and nonhuman—are given consideration in the theoretical implications that result from these meetings. Although Davé is an anthropologist, she presents an interdisciplinary scholarship that

offers a queering narrative of interspecies intersectionality relevant to nonwestern feminisms, anticolonial histories, and critical animal studies. The intimate manner in which she approaches the writing process makes this text accessible to academics and general audiences alike, becoming at once intellectually stimulating as well as invaluable practical.

Works cited

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Author Bio

Gregory Leath Serrano is a PhD candidate in Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Kentucky. Gregory's research examines human–nonhuman relationships through critical animal studies and feminist ecocriticism perspectives, with particular attention to disability and affect.



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