

Afterword

For a Synaesthetics of Seeing

Naisargi N. Dave

Abstract

This Afterword explores the volume's ambivalent relationship to witnessing, and argues for a synaesthetics of seeing. Drawing on literature fictive and otherwise, with an emphasis on animality (fictive and otherwise), it reflects on how sound and touch enable us to see.

Keywords: animals, synaesthetics, touch, witnessing

You once told me that the human eye is god's loneliest creation. How so much of the world passes through the pupil and still it holds nothing. The eye, alone in its socket, doesn't even know there's another one, just like it, an inch away, just as hungry, just as empty.

—Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Each of the articles in this collection on the politics and ethics of witnessing shares a vital and vitalizing ambivalence about witnessing's promise. Beginning with Chua and Grinberg's Introduction, which itself begins with the spectacle of the barely bridled heteropatriarchy that constituted the Kavanaugh hearings, we confront the technologies through which our 'bearing witness' (of a witness attempting to inhabit that mantle which we, with hardly any effort, achieve) is staged in the 'era of the witness'. Grinberg's own article thinks further about staging, through a rigorously empirical ethnography of the recursive hospitality between Palestinian witness and Israeli documenter, through which testimony becomes not only an event, but an event that takes the form of vertical, if transformative, intimacies. All of these articles, too, play – with different levels of explicitness – on and with the anthropologist as a witness-figure herself. This is central to Chua's argument, in her powerful piece, in which the 'ennobling' of the (human) anthropologist-as-witness (and therefore saviour) might be undone through an understanding of witnessing as a 'relational encounter' between entities seen and unseen.



Likewise, in Raffaella Fryer-Moreira's insightful article about *mediativistas* in Brazil, the author posits a subtle but key distinction between the authoritative practice of ethnographic 'being there' and the deliberately and radically partial knowledge produced – as if for its own sake – by *mediativistas*. Their method of 'running towards' the event provides an interesting counterpoint, perhaps, to the staging that Grinberg so meticulously documents in institutional witness practices. Rachel Douglas-Jones offers an important, counterintuitive argument, on the other hand, that views institutional witness practices as a kind of meta/ethical work she calls 'attestive assemblages'. Eray Çaylı's richly ethnographic article then returns to a certain scepticism about collective, institutionalized witnessing, arguing that what he calls 'architectural witnessing' idealizes citizen participation, but without due regard to the hegemonic, vertical intimacies that, as Grinberg shows, structure the encounter between witness and dispossession. Valerie Hänsch's article – evocative and provocative – returns once again to the question of staging, and of anthropological practice, arguing that victims of forced displacement in Northern Sudan engage in 'crisis witnessing', in which the anthropologist's camera plays a complex role. Finally, the virtual conversation (a harbinger of things to come!) between the issue editors and Asale Angel-Ajani, Carolyn Dean and Meg McLagan focuses on how witnessing has become a 'central moral activity and trope of Western culture and politics' (Dean), while also being an ethical demand that we cannot refuse.

My own work on witnessing has manifested a similar ambivalence. In my case, though, the ambivalence is less attuned to witnessing's relationship to staging and the ethnographic endeavour, and more centred on its privileging of sight, and therefore of reason. On this, I share concerns with Liana Chua, whose article so persuasively describes how ocular-centric practices and ideals of witnessing entrench, rather than undo, anthropocentric liberalism. In my paper, 'Witness' (Dave 2014), I attempted to answer a very simple question: why and how is it that some of us, but not all of us, become beholden to a life in which – as Fryer-Moreira also puts it – one forever *runs towards* the other, rather than remaining more or less safely encased in our own human skins? I argued, based on what I call moral biographies of animal activists in India, that the transformation in vital resonance occurs through a singular event of witnessing: of the locking of eyes between a human and an animal in pain, after which 'nothing can ever be the same' (2014: 243). Drawing on Elizabeth Povinelli (2006), I call these 'intimate events': they are a bit like falling in love but instead we fall into obligation. I define witnessing as a disciplined staying-put, even when one would rather turn or run away, and is thus to be implicated *and culpable* in an event that is not at all inexorable. In contrast to the voyeur, who is also characterized by a disciplined staying-put, the witness does not feel *more* alive in her own skin: the skin is shed, along with the fiction of the self. And so I argue that to witness might be best 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 ... a skin that is also inhabited by the animal' (2014: 442).

It's unthinkable, even immoral, to write about witnessing in September 2020 in North America – or anywhere in this world – without staying put within the reckoning that has followed the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and other Black people by police in the United States. The cameras that recorded George Floyd's killing – as well as his final words – *and* the eyes that did not see the murder of Breonna Taylor in the bedroom of her home, demonstrate the importance of bearing witness, as Black Lives Matter has become a litany and a vital refrain: a *surround* (Harney and Moten 2013).

The novelist Jesmyn Ward recently published an essay called 'On Witness and Repair', in which she reflects with a devastating clarity on the sudden death of her husband, which was followed by the tragedies of the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd (Ward 2020). Describing her terror, after her husband had passed, that she would once again find herself in an ICU, seeing the 'tender soles' of another beloved struggling for breath, mechanically breathed, she writes that she is 'terrified of the terrible commitment at the heart of me that reasons that if the person I love has to endure this, then the least I can do is stand there, the least I can do is witness, the least I can do is tell them over and over again, aloud, *I love you. We love you. We ain't going nowhere*'. Witnessing: a disciplined staying-put. But also, Ward writes: the *least* we can do. Ward reflects on the protestors who take to streets across the world, recognizable through their shared, universal gestures of witnessing: zipped-up hoodies, masks, fists raised to skies. 'Even now, each day,' she says, 'they witness.' The essay ends, however, where it began, with her husband's last breaths and the reluctant truth of the limitations of seeing. 'When my Beloved died, a doctor told me: *The last sense to go is hearing. When someone is dying, they lose sight and smell and taste and touch. They even forget who they are. But in the end, they hear you.*' And so Ward ends, not with the disciplined staying-put, but in the surround – the memory not of a sight, but of a voice: 'I hear you say: *We here*'.

The poet Ocean Vuong writes that 'the human eye is god's loneliest creation' (Vuong 2019). What might this mean? There *are* two of them, right? Shouldn't the eyes, in our dyadic world, be the model of good sensing? I think that's precisely Vuong's point: that sight sits atop our hierarchy of the senses, and the pound of flesh they pay in return is loneliness. Does the literature on witnessing, as well as its valorization more generally, shore up the ocular-centric hierarchy of the sensible, leaving us all, and the world itself – like the eye – lonely?

This brings us back to what is described in the collection's virtual conversation as the 'dark side' of witnessing (and isn't that very casual phrase evidence of an obsession with light, an ocularphobic phobia of the dark – many of us, as I'll point out later, 'see' far better in darkness). So let's then call it simply the negative side of witnessing's ledger. Consider *witness* not as the thing one does, but as the imperative: 'Witness! Behold!' This is the other meaning of witness, witnessing as 'I/we see that', as an appeal to evidence presumed to be commonly shared precisely because of the privileged linking of ocularity to reason. Here, vision is not singularly intimate, as in the forms of witness that Jesmyn Ward allows us to witness; instead, it is

its opposite: *common sense*. And what, I wonder, is less world-transformative than appeals to (a) common sense?

Another question I would add to this side of witnessing's ledger is: who can witness? Can an animal *witness* or is witnessing a uniquely human endeavour, demonstrating a stealth correlation between the anthropocentric privileging of sight and speech? (This is a problem Chua's article addresses.) Derrida, in his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, argues self-critically that witnessing is autobiographical: it is proof that I am. The witnessed animal can only be 'objectively staged' for this purpose of autopoiesis; it is seen but does not itself 'see', existing only as 'spectacle for a specular subject' (Derrida 2008: 82).

Is that so?

Clarice Lispector, the late Brazilian writer, writes in her novel, *The Passion According to GH*, about an encounter between a woman (a sculptor) and a cockroach:

Holy Mary, mother of God, I offer thee my life in exchange for that moment yesterday's not being true. The roach with the white matter was looking at me. I don't know if it was seeing me. I don't know what a roach sees. *But if its eyes weren't seeing me, its existence was existing me* – in the primary world I had entered, beings exist others as a way of seeing one another. And in that world I was coming to know, there are several ways that mean seeing: one a looking at the other without seeing him, one possessing the other, one eating the other, one just being in a place and the other being there too: all that also means seeing. The roach wasn't seeing me directly, it was with me. The roach wasn't seeing me with its eyes but with its body. And I – I was seeing. There was no way not to see it. No way to deny. (Lispector [1964] 2012: 73)

There is so much here, an entire afterword's worth and more. But let me focus on these lines, in which 'if its eyes weren't seeing me, its existence was existing me ... beings exist others as a way of seeing one another.' It is not necessarily, following Derrida, that because the entity is an animal 'its eyes weren't seeing me', for as the narrator says, most actions that go under the sign of 'seeing' are not really seeing at all, but looking, possessing, and being indifferent to. What one cannot help but see, however – what an entity can never deny or be indifferent to – is *being existed* by another. Neither I, the seer, nor the entity I see, is *existed* through the mere exchange of gazes, however, and that is Lispector's vital offering: that we only see one another, truly see, by bringing each other into existence through a sensory encounter that is synaesthetic – entire – leaving an impression not simply on the soul, but *on the skin*.

The French philosopher Michel Serres, in his *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (Serres 2017), uses this term a lot, *impress*, and I think for him it means what Lispector means when she uses the term *exist* (both are translations into English). For Serres, an *impress* is an 'image left on the skin', that skin being 'where soul and world comingle' (2017: 4). Note that phrase, 'an image left on the skin': to see, to truly see, is to be irrevocably touched. *Scarred*. Susan Buck-Morss, in her 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics', uses this term, *impress*, too, and to a similar end as Serres, which is to dethrone sight from its precariously omniscient perch at

the top of the sensory hierarchy but, more importantly, to understand the senses as inseparable at all, constituting what Buck-Morss calls the 'synaesthetic system' (Buck-Morss 2015), or what Abou Farman calls the 'synaesthetic field' (Farman 2019). This system, Buck-Morss writes, is 'open in the extreme sense. Not only open to the world ... but the nerve cells within the body form a network ... within which everything leaks'. To see is to touch. To touch is to exist an other. To exist is to see, and to see is to hear a voice at the end of the world.

For all of his anti-hierarchical sensory equality, though, Serres is pretty down on sight and on those who 'need to see in order to know or believe' (2017: 24). And he, like Vuong, makes a good case. (Statues, to be brought down, have to be toppled.) Sound, he says, 'puts sight in its place' (2017: 48). 'Sight distances us', he says, while 'sound envelops ... Looking leaves us free, listening imprisons us; we can free ourselves from a scene by lowering our eyelids or putting our fists over our eyes, by turning our back or taking flight. We cannot escape persistent clamour' (2017: 47). But it is touch that ultimately will 'win the day' (2017: 54). What Serres says about sight speaks prose to Vuong's poetry on the loneliness of the eye. 'Sight is pained by the sight of mixture. It prefers to distinguish, separate, judge distances; *the eye would feel pain if it were touched. It protects itself and shies away.* Our flexible skin [however] adapts by remaining stable ... it apprehends and comprehends, implicates and explicates, it tends towards the liquid and the fluid, and approximates mixture' (2017: 67). Like sound in Jermyn Ward's essay, touch, Serres says, 'surrounds and encircles' (2017: 55), leaving the work of the eye a wonder, no doubt, but also *the least we can do* (Ward 2020). How does this synaesthetic sensibility express itself in and help us think through the articles in this collection? How does this openness to being exposed, impressed upon, existed by another, resonate with the issue's themes of truth and transformation?

Georges Didi-Huberman is, like Serres and the authors in this collection, attentive to the limits of ocular witnessing in the pursuit of what is true. In Didi-Huberman's essay, 'How to Open Your Eyes', he asks, via the filmmaker Harun Farocki, 'How to invest someone with knowledge who refuses to know? How to open your eyes?' (2009: 42). The image qua image is not the answer. Farocki, in his 1969 film *Inextinguishable Fire*, seeks to show the horrors of napalm in its use by American forces in the Vietnam War. But he is faced with what Didi-Huberman calls 'an aporia for the thought of the image'. He writes: 'If we show you pictures of napalm damage, you'll close your eyes. First you'll close your eyes to the pictures; then you'll close your eyes to the memory; then you'll close your eyes to the facts; then you'll close your eyes to the connections between them. If we show you a person with napalm burns, we'll hurt your feelings ... and feel we used napalm on you, at your expense' (Didi-Huberman 2009: 41). The answer, for Farocki as well as for Didi-Huberman, is to touch and be touched: to be *impressed* upon, violently *existed*. Farocki, in the middle of his narration from a Vietnamese testimony, reaches offscreen for a burning cigarette, and then presses it into his arm for 3.5 seconds, while a narrator compares the temperature of a burning cigarette to

napalm. To see is not enough. To open your eyes, Didi-Huberman says, you must 'put your hand in the fire'.

I'll end these short reflections with a minor story – not by any obvious means of a man putting his hand in the fire but, then again, all I mean by the phrase is to be exposed; impressed upon; existed by another. His name is Abodh, and he works for an organization in Mumbai called Welfare for Stray Dogs which provides medical treatment to dogs and all sorts of other creatures who live on the city's streets. On Sunday mornings he leads a group of volunteers (every other day it's paid professionals who do the work) on a long amble in the southern part of the island city, guided by a list of animals who need tending to and their approximate location, based on calls to the office or Abodh's cell phone.

The crowds that gather around Abodh on these Sunday mornings are rapt and, depending on the scene, sometimes three to four deep, straining to watch something as mundane as Abodh, perched in front of a storefront, placing drops in the infected eye socket of a blinded cat, his hand firmly on her scruff, tending to her with tenderness but a matter-of-factness that says, 'This is what to do.' He does not say, 'This is what *you* should do,' nor does he say, 'This is what *one* should do.' The touch is between him and the cat; he does not ask for volunteers from among the onlookers, he does not admonish, he does not instruct. He *touches*. And that is all.

Scholars like Erin Manning (2016), Mayra Rivera (2015) or Pablo Maurette (2018) write movingly about the *simultaneity* of touch – that singular characteristic of the haptic in which the sense that one exercises is sensed back onto the self: to touch is to be touched, as Maurette puts it; touching something requires being touched *by* it, Rivera writes, too. But both also point out something exceedingly ordinary, not singular at all, about touch: that to touch, at its best, is also to see; to see, at its best, is also to touch. This interlacing is not just of touching and being touched, but the coming into being of the synaesthetic sensorium itself. What Abodh understands is that to see is to wear your heart on your hands, to become yourself exposed. His crowds are rapt, he invites that spectacle: to create what Maurette calls a 'type of seeing that is like touching' (2018: 8); what Rivera calls a type of seeing that is 'literally – a *palpation* with the look' (2015: 76). The touch is between him and the cat. But everyone has touched the cat.

Naisargi N. Dave is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Her research concerns emergent forms of politics and relationality in India, specifically queer and animal. Dave's articles have appeared in journals such as *American Ethnologist*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Social Text*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, *Signs*, and *Feminist Studies*. Her book, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* is published by Duke University Press and was awarded the Ruth Benedict Prize. She is completing her second book, *The Social Skin: Humans and Animals in India*.

Email: naisargi.dave@utoronto.ca.

References

- Buck-Morss, S. 2015. 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics.' *Susan Buck-Morss* (blog), December. <http://susanbuckmorss.info/text/aesthetics-and-anaesthetics-part-ii/>.
- Dave, N. 2014. 'Witness: Humans, Animals, and the Politics of Becoming.' *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (3): 433–456. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.3.01>.
- Derrida, J. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. M.-L. Mallet, trans. D. Wills. 1st edition. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Didi-Huberman, G. 2009. 'How to Open Your Eyes.' In A. Ehmman, K. Eshun and N. M. Alter (eds), *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?* London: Koenig Books. pp. 38–50
- Farman, Abou. 2019. 'Unlearning Pleasure.' *Shifter 24: Learning and Unlearning*, eds Rit Premnath and Avi Alpert.
- Harney, S. and F. Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions.
- Lispector, C. [1964] 2012. *The Passion According to G.H.*, trans. I. Novey. New York: New Directions.
- Manning, E. 2016. *The Minor Gesture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Maurette, P. 2018. *The Forgotten Sense: Meditations on Touch*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Povinelli, E. A. 2006. *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rivera, M. 2015. *Poetics of the Flesh*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Serres, M. 2017. *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Vuong, O. 2019. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Ward, J. 2020. 'On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic.' *Vanity Fair*, September. <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2020/08/jesmyn-ward-on-husbands-death-and-grief-during-covid>.