Review
Reviewed Work(s): Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics by Naisargi N. Dave
Review by: Ratna Kapur
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/24393812
Accessed: 30-01-2020 10:28 UTC

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the twenty-first century, may well be to locate and understand the creative social networks whose contours are not confined by geography or ethnicity, and that forcefully blur the lines between production and consumption.

Noah Tsika
Queens College–City University of New York


Queer Activism in India by Naisargi Dave examines the emergence of lesbian identity and communities in India from the 1980s to the early 2000s. The book spans a period when gay activism was largely resistive and challenging, reflected in the protests over the temporary banning in 1998 of Deepa Metha’s film Fire, about two sisters-in-law who reluctantly but passionately fall in love; the first gay pride event held in India in Delhi in 2008; and the decriminalization of adult, consensual same-sex sex in 2009. Dave’s fieldwork focuses primarily on activist organizations in Delhi, letters written by lesbian women, as well as research conducted with self-identified lesbian groups and queer activist organizations throughout India. The exciting aspect of this book is how Dave draws on the everyday practices of queer activism, in particular lesbian activism in India, to expose the deeply considered and ethical positions that they take.

For Dave, activism is an ethical practice. And this ethics consists of critique, invention, and relational practice between lesbian groups as well as among lesbians and queers. Dave traces the relationship between the ethics of activism and the prevailing social norms from where this activism emerges. She is able to identify a continuous oscillation between a politics that aspires for change and new social formations and at the same time one that constantly seems to question itself and the formations and arrangements that have been achieved through its advocacy.

Dave traces the different paths of several Delhi-based groups—Sakhi, Sangini, and PRISM (People for the Rights of Indian Sexual Minorities). Sakhi, which centered the politics of lesbian sexuality, provided a dynamic space in which women from all over India could write to openly describe their feelings and express relief that they were not alone. Yet Sakhi was also increasingly perceived as a space for Western lesbians to congregate and also sought to call women to their sexualities, linking them to the global category of “lesbian” and the market of lesbian identification. Feelings and desire were devalued while politics and dialogue were elevated.

Yet this process was perceived as alienating for some, leading partly to the emergence of the category of the “Indian lesbian” as being outside politics. While foreigners were linked to politics, Indians were more pristine and not quite ready for identity politics. The notion led to the establishment of Sangini, a Delhi-based helpline and support group for lesbians that directed its efforts toward inclusion and that is presenting lesbians as nonthreatening and apolitical. Its object was to serve as a safe space for women and to eschew politics.

And yet another development mid-2001 saw the founding of PRISM by queer activists looking for a new direction in Indian queer politics that would develop broad-based alliances to withstand attacks by the state. It was an advocacy collective willing to take risks and be public. PRISM gradually shifted away from identity politics, resulting in the circumspection of the affective space of politics as well as the rejection of identity as the primary shaping mechanism of gay and lesbian life.

The outstanding features of Dave’s book are twofold: firstly, the meticulous tracing of conversations, debates, and activism that inform the politics of lesbian spaces and queer communities in India, and secondly, the centering of the lesbian or female queer subject, thus marking a break from “L” as merely an add-on to a primarily gay-male-based advocacy and scholarship that is often represented as being the voice of the homosexual subject in India. Her rich documentation of the diverse discussions that have occurred and continue to take place in the space of the postcolonial also highlights how these conversations
have a history and genealogy that cannot be captured in the universal gay blueprint that is emerging within international and human rights arenas.

The author’s deep sensitivity is evident in her interactions with the queer and lesbian communities with whom she engages. Her excavations do not remain at the level of external advocacy and activism, but also delve into the role of affect and emotions in the constitution of such advocacy. While some strong players—individuals and groups—occupy the space of lesbian advocacy, Dave does not let them overwhelm the central concern of her research, which is to document these different emerging worlds in queer activism in India, and the possibilities as well as containments that they offer. These cannot be read simply in negative terms, but as she so clearly demonstrates they are ethically productive. Dave’s book marks a significant contribution to the archive of queer scholarship generally, but more importantly to making visible a postcolonial perspective in this scholarship.

Ratna Kapur
Jindal Global Law School
Delhi, India


Densely written and thought-provoking, Becoming White Clay: A History and Archaeology of Jicarilla Apache Enclavement by B. Sunday Eiselt shares the culture history of the Jicarilla Apache from the multi-century migrations of Athapaskan-speaking peoples across a half a continent to the words of individuals drawn from late-nineteenth-century legal documents that describe the final moments of pre-reservation life. The Jicarilla reservation is one of the last Apache reservations created because the Jicarilla maintained their invisibility in plain sight by becoming “white clay.” White clay was worn by raiders to protect the body and the identity of the man, just as the enclavement of the Jicarilla population within northern New Mexico vecino society protected their heritage from the effects of early confinement and assimilation by the American government. Further, just as a warrior chooses to apply the white clay, the agency of Jicarilla in their economic and political choices is emphasized throughout.

After two introductory chapters, the book is divided into two parts, for a total of nine chapters. The first chapter describes the goals of the study and the course of the arguments to be made. In the second chapter Eiselt posits that enclavement, the process whereby nomadic societies become incorporated into a multiethnic setting, was the key to Jicarilla social and political invisibility in the early American period, thereby enabling Jicarilla persistence. The enclave concept was introduced by Frederick Barth, Edward Spicer, and others in 1960s studies of “ethnic enclaves.” In staking out a contemporary anthropological definition of enclavement, Eiselt positions the book within postcolonial conversations about adaptation, assimilation, resistance, resilience, and hybridity. The concept is updated in its focus on dynamic models that examine the rights and obligations created by gender, kinship, and social networks. The spatial consequences of social and political action are an important sub-theme.

In the three chapters in Part 1, the scope goes from vast to focused. Eiselt presents, first, a four-field anthropological synthesis of previous research on Athabaskan origins in the Southwest. Language already differentiates Athabaskans from other indigenous groups in North America, and genetic studies generally support identified patterns of language movement and change. Citing the work of Jake Ives, Eiselt describes the Athabaskan expression of a Dravidian kinship form that affects local group organization and the construction of alliances, with ramifications for cooperative economic behaviors. Material culture markers, including a diagnostic hide-scraping tool, chi-thos, are also introduced. She then evaluates archaeological cultures on either side of the Rocky Mountains for evidence of Athabaskans, while recognizing the potential for social mixture throughout this corridor.

Then, Eiselt examines the creation of “Apacheria” in the Southwest United States...