Performing multispecies studies in southern Africa: historical legacies, marginalized subjects, reflexive positionalities

Multispecies studies are known for tackling human exceptionalism. While the field has seen a remarkable increase in popularity among scholars in the humanities and social sciences, critiques argue it neglects inequalities and consequential differences between humans and between humans and other-than-humans. These critiques are especially relevant in the context of southern Africa, where extreme inequalities among humans persist, while wildlife is often perceived to enjoy a favored position in the region‘s prominent conservation industries. As four researchers working in a multispecies study project focusing on the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA) in southern Africa, we pose the question of what a politicized multispecies studies might look like. In this article, we will share our thoughts and reflections on working in this complex political landscape. Using insights from our own fields we share some of the persistent concerns encountered during fieldwork that we will then discuss and contextualize with existing multispecies literature that deal with similar concerns. We identify three salient themes that should inform and politicize multispecies work in postcolonial conservation landscapes: historical legacies, reflexive positionalities, and marginalized subjects.

Keywords: multispecies studies; conservation; postcolonialism; research praxis; southern Africa; KAZA TFCA.

Introduction

From religious significance to commercial use, anthropology has long dealt with the role of animals in human societies. However, they have mostly received attention only as passive objects of human representation. Multispecies studies aim to break with such anthropocentric views by decentering the human and foregrounding other-than-humans as meaningful actors in world-making. Presenting a promising and rapidly growing form of anthropological engagement, multispecies studies is spreading from academic circles mostly situated in the Global North. However, multispecies scholars

have performed research both in the Global North and Global South, often with a focus on conservation and postcolonialism. Here, we find that the non-anthropocentric aspirations of multispecies studies and humanistic concerns dealing with colonial pasts are often in tension. Overcoming human exceptionalism may simply not be at the top of the list for some scholars dealing with the fraught histories of conservation in these places, which are tied to colonial exploitation and dispossession, and still bear its marks in both contemporary conservation practices and wider human-nature relations. In this sense, anthropologists' attentiveness to people and their concerns has been fundamental to recognition of them as full human beings, which is central to questions of justice. Are we not moving backwards with the turn to multispecies worlds, which aims to decenter the human?

Critical scholars have asked this same question and have reproached multispecies ethnographers for remaining largely apolitical while celebrating interspecies entanglements and the world-making qualities of other-than-humans (Giraud 2019, 6-9). Although non-anthropocentric writings are a political project in itself, they are said to fail to address the widespread abuse of animals (Kopnina 2017), the increasing inequalities between rich and poor (Büscher 2022), and the real consequences of the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss (Watson 2016). Besides the appeal to make the consequences of capitalism, colonialism and environmental destruction more visible in more-than-human writings, multispecies studies have been criticized for the colonial continuity of knowledge production. Above all, the disregard for strikingly similar concepts in Indigenous knowledge traditions and scholarly writings, and the self-referential practice of Euro-Western scholars, have been addressed (Hovorka 2017; Todd 2016). However, such critics overlook that Indigenous knowledge on more-than-human lifeworlds is indeed the focus of some multispecies writings and is valued as a crucial source of knowledge production (Rose 2004; Kohn 2013; du Plessis 2022)

As four researchers working in the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA), in this article we reflect on what it means to perform a *political* multispecies ethnography in this study region, which we characterize as a postcolonial conservation landscape.[i] The KAZA TFCA was established in 2011 by its partner states Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and envelops 20 national parks, a large number of wildlife-management areas, community-

conservation areas, forest reserves and conservation areas of other forms. Thus, while in itself not a strictly protected area, the KAZA TFCA includes conservation areas, some of which have been established in colonial times through dispossessions and forced resettlements (see, for example, Chiweshe 2022; Vehrs & Zickel 2023). Moreover, conservation in the region has contributed to the marginalization of the region's people through colonial policies restricting access to natural resources, including but not limited to the rights to hunt for subsistence (Matanzima & Marowa 2022; Mbaiwa et al. 2008). Conservation continues to be a sector dominated by outsiders, while many of the 2.7 million people who live in the region are poor and vulnerable to incurring damage from living close to wildlife (Stoldt et al. 2020). All in all, there is a widespread sense in which (post)colonial conservation in the region has valued the interests of wildlife against and over those of people (Garland 2008; Noga et al. 2018).

In this context, anthropologists' engagement with conservation cannot exclude social and environmental justice concerns, and also needs to decolonize its own engagement. Typically, such efforts approach conservation as an instrument, discourse or ideology which works in the interests of the state by controlling human populations, or in the interest of private actors by facilitating the accumulation of capital (often through international tourism). Approaching conservation as a matter of human politics, then, serves to correct conservation's neglect and marginalization of people and their concerns. But in correcting the issue, we contend, these approaches have lost sight of the many other species that conservation deals with. While indeed there are good reasons to shift the attention, we believe that the shift does not have to be total. Working through an ethics of care, we argue that pursuing the goal of social justice cannot come at the expense of ignoring multispecies justice. Nor can it be the other way around. Further, if other-than-humans are approached as the mere background of human politics, where their precarious existence only matters as a source of legitimation for conservation actors, an understanding of what motivates conservationists in most cases is lost. This risks creating a rift between conservation and society and a bifurcation of the possible ways forward. Moving beyond this dichotomy thus requires that we achieve a multispecies or more-than-human understanding of conservation which is explicitly political in nature (Gillespie 2019; Chao & Kirksey 2022).

In this article, we reflect on our experiences working as anthropologists in the KAZA region, employing a political multispecies approach to issues of conservation. Our article is structured around three central themes that we identified through a conversation between our field experiences and the literature. These are: historical legacies, reflexive positionalities, and marginalized subjects. While none of these themes are new to anthropology, we believe they have received insufficient attention and/or exposition in multispecies studies, and therefore warrant further thought and writing. It also has to be noted that in taking up these themes, we explicitly focus on research practices that we as individual researchers are more or less in control of. That is, we do not discuss more structural issues of how research is organized and conduct is coded.

For each of the themes, we proceed by first presenting insights from our own field research, describing some of the issues that fall under that theme, and then discuss our insights alongside multispecies literature that has raised similar concerns. In the text we write both in the first-person perspective, for [author 1] and [author 2], and in the case of [author 3] and [author 4], who discussed their field insights together under one theme, we wrote the text in the third-person perspective. Working through these themes progressively, we bring into view an expanding complexity that is associated with multispecies studies in postcolonial conservation landscapes. In the conclusion, we bring our different insights together and argue that it is important for multispecies studies that humans and their concerns are not backgrounded even if they are not always foregrounded either.

Historical legacies

Case study - [author 1]

The parking space at the Wenela border post in Katima Mulilo between Namibia and Zambia is filled with copper-loaded trucks. The Wenela border post is an important trade hub for imports and exports between southern African countries, especially for copper and increasingly for timber. While I am waiting in my car for the border police officer to check my documents, copper and timber trucks coming from Zambia and entering Namibia are slowly passing by. The police officer is coming back, handing me over my documents and wishing me a good journey into Zambia. On his uniform above his breast pocket is a round badge with a tree on it. On the edge of the badge it says

"Sesheke District – Home of Timber". I am on my way to Sioma, which lies around 130 km north of the border with Namibia. Shortly before I reach Sioma town, I pass three sawmills next to each other on the left-hand side of the road. In one of them I spot a China Shipping truck surrounded by piles of logs. On the wall next to the gate is written in white chalk “We buy timber”.

In my research I am looking at the diverse meanings of rosewood and its relations with humans and other-than-human beings. Centering the tree as the pivot of diverse multispecies relations, this section discusses the importance of taking the historical legacies of those relations into account in order to politicize multispecies ethnography. Sioma’s Kalahari Sand Woodlands are famous for indigenous hardwood species like teak, *mukwa* and *muzauli*, also known as rosewood. During the colonial period, southwestern Zambia’s forests were exploited for teak and *mukwa* by mainly South African and European companies (Nott et al. 2020). Despite the area’s colonial history of exploitation of timber, the sawmills that are found around Sioma today were established only in recent years and are mainly owned and managed by Chinese, who are targeting another tree species. In an interview at one of the Chinese sawmills, the manager tells me rosewood (*Guibourtia coleosperma*) is the only species they are interested in. The logs are exported to China or Vietnam where they are used to make (luxury) furniture. When I asked the manager: “Why rosewood?”, he answered: “They like that color of rosewood in China” (Interview, 02.12.22).

The term rosewood refers to a group of hardwood species with a red color (Wenbin & Xiufang 2013). Furniture made out of rosewood has a special cultural significance in China due to its extensive use by imperial families during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Before 2010, China drew primarily from the rosewood stocks of Southeast Asia. Due to decades of over-harvesting, those stocks have declined and, in some areas, have even disappeared. This has led China to look for alternative sources in Africa. Since 2015, Africa has been the world’s leading region for rosewood extraction and the leading trading partner of China and Vietnam (EIA 2019). This includes Zambia, where the increasing exploitation of rosewood since 2010 has led to the vanishing of the big *muzauli* trees. Zambian rosewood is not only a resource that is exploited for economic purposes by foreign companies. For the people of China, it is a way of conserving their cultural heritage through the appreciation of the red-colored wooden furniture: “In our culture, in China, we like the colour red. Furniture is

red, clothes, for celebrating something, are red…" (Chinese timber merchant, interview, 12.02.23).

At the same time, the logging of rosewood is seen as a major cause of deforestation and affects the livelihoods of local people, their knowledge and their ways of living with trees. When [research assistant 1], my research assistant, and I talked to people in the villages about different trees, *muzauli* was usually mentioned as a fruit-bearing tree that provides people with food as well as medicine. *Muzauli* is an evergreen tree that grows up to 20 meters high. It mostly forms woodlands in deep Kalahari sands with other hardwood species like teak and *mukwa*. Its fruits are dark brown, split open on one side exposing a bean-like red seed. Those seeds are collected, cooked and eaten by the people in the villages. Historically, the *muzauli* tree was – among other fruit-bearing trees – a protected species under the forest laws of Barotseland and not allowed to be cut (Forest Laws Barotseland 1937).

During an interview in one of the villages close to the forest, Kenneth[ii], an elderly man, tells [research assistant 1] and me: "Long ago, trees were very safe because our parents were not used to cut them. (…) Nowadays when those with chainsaws came to this country, trees are now affected." When we asked people in the villages about changes in the forest landscape, they referred to the timber-cutting industries and the dwindling number of large trees, especially of *muzauli*. Kenneth explains the impacts the diminishing trees have on people's lives.

> "When we have no trees, we can't survive. We have challenges, more especially with rain. There is less rain because big trees are already gone. Even wind, 'cause those big trees are used to block out wind. Even our houses can be destroyed because there is no big tree which can block that wind. Even our river itself can be also affected from soil erosion." (Kenneth, small-scale farmer, interview, 30.11.23)

Kenneth and other small-scale farmers emphasized the dependence of humans upon the trees but also the interrelations with other-than-human beings. The rain that drops out the trees and into the soil produces streams and ponds where the fish live; birds and bees depend on the trees to produce honey for more-than-humans. Rosewood and other fruit-bearing trees not only give food to humans but also to elephants who increasingly approach villages to collect fruits from the trees that are

kept in people's yards. Today, most *muzauli* trees are seen along roadsides and in villages where they give people shade, food and medicine. The *muzauli* tree does not only provide food, it also evokes memories of various pasts and can become a symbol for a home. The local forestry officer, Ben, tells me:

> "I remember from history, I can get muzauli and plant it at my yard and it will grow. So, people use it for remembering. For instance, my children are still young, so I am planting the muzauli there so that when they grow up, they will say 'this muzauli, my dad planted it, so this is our land, this is our place'." (Interview, 27.10.22)

During my fieldwork I gained insights into the very different engagements with rosewood from Chinese sawmillers as well as local small-scale farmers. The perspective of Kenneth shows that a tree cannot be examined in only representational or functional terms, but instead has to be thought of as a dynamic and relational entity that shapes the lives of humans and other-than-humans alike. Rosewood as experienced by different people changes in its significance and its ontological status. While the particular tree species was not of interest for European settlers and the British/South African colonial regime, it was a protected tree species for its fruits as a valuable food source for the Malozi. Today the same tree is rather known as a high-value timber species that attracts especially Chinese companies. This new attribution of value coming from China in turn has effects on local approaches to rosewood. In order to capture the diverse meanings and relations of rosewood, it is crucial to take the history of those relations into account.

Among the existing multispecies literature, there is an emergence of historical approaches that aim to capture the complexity of present multispecies entanglements and the agency of other-than-humans in the creation of places and colonial hierarchies (Schoenbrun & Johnson 2018). Taking up the critique that multispecies ethnography often focuses on co-constitution, mutuality and alliances and thereby overlooks asymmetrical hierarchies, Haris (2022) argues for a postcolonial multispecies ethnography that shows interspecies relationships as pivoting on multiple histories that also take account of colonial and postcolonial encounters involving oppression and violence.

Building on Haris, for my own research this means looking at the colonial and postcolonial histories of the diverse relations with rosewood. Moving along the "biographies" of tree species allows us to understand how they are valued and encountered in contextually specific ways – influenced by specific processes of extraction, exchange, or protection. How people engage with rosewood differs tremendously according to their own historical background and their own position within the society. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account the history of the research area and reflect upon emerging hierarchies and inequalities. Simultaneously, it is not only the heterogenous historical background of human actors, but also the history of the rosewood tree itself that is shaping the landscape and the lives of people and other species.

That other-than-humans are also subject to colonialism is illustrated by Aderinto (2022), who provides an important contribution toward rethinking colonial subjecthood in Africa by adding diverse animal species into his analytical framework. He shows that core dichotomies of human colonial subjecthood (e.g. good and bad, violent and peaceful) were also embedded in the identities of Nigeria's animal inhabitants. Simultaneously, animals were political actors in that they "resisted human encroachment of their domain, violated human-made laws that undermined their livelihood, reshaped landscapes that reordered human existence, and served as subject of significant debate across multiple strata of the imperial society" (Aderinto 2022, 6). Therefore, he concludes, only by adding other-than-human beings into our analytical framework can we fully comprehend colonialism and the extent of imperial domination.

Other-than-humans are not only victims but also agents of colonialism, which surfaces in the work of Ives (2019). Ives explores the relation between race and nature in colonial knowledge systems in South Africa. She argues for the usefulness of an approach that sheds light on agents of different kinds. By showing how the introduction of the eucalyptus tree dispelled mosquitos and favored the expansion of *white* settlers, Ives demonstrates how a multispecies approach can help to develop a more thorough understanding of settler colonialism and environmental destruction. However, she argues that the ways in which humans are made to belong to different worlds have to be investigated, too.

Applying a postcolonial multispecies approach means examining how colonialism and processes of exclusion shape the material lives of humans and other-than-human beings alike. Aderinto (2022) emphasizes that neither Indigenous African knowledge systems nor colonial archives conceptualize the past as exclusively made and shaped by humans. Humans' historical trajectories were not only dictated by intra-human affairs but also by their engagement with other-than-human beings. Therefore, writing about other-than-humans is crucial for expanding the field of knowledge, including neglected narratives and colonial subjects, and shaping contemporary discourses about the legacies of colonialism. The example of the rosewood tree and the case study of Ives demonstrate that it is important to remain attentive to asymmetrical hierarchies between different groups of people and their diverse histories. Putting the rosewood tree in the center of the study, not only as a resource used by people, but as an actor to which people with different positionalities relate in different ways, allows a diversity of interactions with and multiple narratives of one species to be captured.

In the next part, we will elaborate this point further with regard to our own positionalities, which are situated within complex more-than-human societies. In her research on elephants in KAZA, [author 2] emphasizes the importance of acknowledging various human and other-than-human positionalities that are embedded in postcolonial power structures.

Reflexive positionalities

Case study - [author 2]

The African savanna elephant is emblematic of the goal of sharing natural resources and to (re)connecting protected areas across the five member states of the large KAZA TFCA. In order to secure elephant movements across borders and between protected areas, researchers use a variety of monitoring technologies to identify their paths, which have often been used for generations. This endeavor, however, is not without controversy, as migration routes often run through human settlements or agricultural land, which leads to different forms of human-elephant conflict.

In this section I shed light on the challenges faced when studying elephants, considering my privileged position as a researcher in a context where people's relationships with elephants vary based on their own positionalities. During the first period of my fieldwork in northern Botswana, I mainly focused on the work of "experts" who study elephant populations, movements and behaviors by using various monitoring technologies. In the course of my research, the pachyderms were carefully counted by data analysts using aerial photographs which were displayed on a large flat screen in a climatized office. Some elephants appeared on snapshots when they walked past camera traps, while others, who had been previously equipped with GPS collars, appeared as small dots moving on a laptop screen. These encounters provided me with diverse and rare insights into the lives of elephants, as well as the interests and practices of researchers.

Other occasions brought me much closer to the species that I would come to study for the next few years. When I paid a visit to the Botswana NGO [ANON for review], I was introduced to three orphaned elephants, Tuli, Boipusu and Panda, who were being raised by humans until they were old enough to form their own herd and to go back into the wild. The calves were grazing on the shores of the Chobe River, surrounded by their caregivers. The youngest and smallest of the three females, Boipuso, approached me curiously, ran over my tshirt and my hair with her little trunk and took in my smell. Although she was the youngest and was still far from being fully grown, she already reached up to my shoulder and with a quick move she gently pulled me closer to her. In retrospect, it was always a very positive experience for me to encounter elephants during fieldwork. I never felt unsafe but was excited to see and learn more about this charismatic species.

Six months later, I joined the same NGO on a trip to a village in the Chobe district, where the conservationists work with farmers who suffer from crop-raiding by elephants. Here, the presence of elephants materialized differently. Scattered dung over a farmer's field and a broken fence marked the incursion of the previous night. Large round footprints, imprinted in the dry soil between young corn plants, testified to the elephant's feast on the laboriously grown vegetables. In the course of the day, we visited a couple of fields, in various sizes and places around the village and I met many farmers who experienced similar stories of loss and fear. Even though elephants

weren't the only problem, wildlife was a serious threat for all fields that weren't protected by a fence and the presence of the farmers. If people did not expose themselves to the danger of staying in the fields after dawn, the precious harvest could be gone in just one night.

In Botswana, human-elephant conflict is a prominent topic, and the ones who are most exposed to it are usually the rural poor (Buchholtz et al. 2019). The Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks states that their approach to managing and conserving wildlife and landscapes is based on scientific research (Gureja et al. 2014). Although this seems favorable, social scientists pointed out that participatory frameworks are often missing in Botswana's conservation decisions, which have led to further marginalization of people living in wildlife areas (LaRocco & Mogende 2022). The presupposition that elephants belong to the state of Botswana combined with the feeling that local people do not benefit from them, while bearing the costs of high wildlife numbers, led to an increasing estrangement of local communities from wildlife (DeMotts & Hoon 2012). Lastly, they feel not heard in decision-making processes and are often left uninformed about studies and policies that impact their lives (LaRocco et al. 2019). Thus, people's experiences with elephants in Botswana vary widely, with the rural poor being the most vulnerable and often struggling to access knowledge about wildlife.

As a *white* Western researcher, I could relatively easily enter the worlds of privileged ecologists, wildlife officers and local NGOs and get to know their ways of studying elephants. The way I entered the field, and how I got to know elephants particularly, was impacted by the privileged people I studied, but also enabled by my own positionality. Since Laura Nader (1972) early voiced the need to look at decision makers and organizations that exercise power, it is not unusual for anthropologists to study people of different – including privileged – backgrounds. However, my own position in the field was situated in between hierarchies of humans and other-than-humans that are shaped by colonial histories, policies and material realities. Thus, by investigating these complex processes it is important not only to use privileges and opportunities to "study up", but also to make visible who is excluded in political decisions and who bears the costs.

Seeking inspiration from natural scientists to learn about other-than-human agency and to study their ways of knowledge production, as I did in my research, is a common approach in multispecies ethnography (see for example Kirksey 2015; Swanson 2017). However, the people I accompanied not only relate differently to elephants but also exercise power in a time where conservation decisions are increasingly data-driven (Jewell 2013). Consequently, it is important to reflect on these dynamics and to point to the limits of scientific knowledge while taking different ways of knowing other-than-humans into consideration (Holmberg 2022, 176). At the same time, elephants have to be taken seriously as subjects, too, and not only be given attention as political pawns between different human groups.

Giraud further outlines the limits of an approach that pays great attention to relations and co-constitutiveness. She urges multispecies ethnographers to shift their focus from relationality and entanglements to "an ethics of exclusion, which pays attention to the entities, practices, and ways of being that are *foreclosed* when other entangled realities are materialized" (Giraud 2019, 2, emphasis in original). Although arguments of relationality and entanglements can direct new ethics, for example concerning the relations between humans and more-than humans, it can also obscure exclusions and those who suffer under established relations.

Turnbull and Van Patter bring this down to more practical questions that researchers might encounter. They acknowledge that research itself is political and that researchers have impacts on what they study. Yet, they argue that an awareness of complex relations is not enough but that scientists have to engage with their own responsibility for the connections and exclusions they might create (Turnbull & Van Patter 2022, 162). Both experienced ethically difficult moments during their fieldwork and reflect on their decisions and impacts beyond the recognition of entanglements. The authors take their observations of violence against animals – and partial involvement in it – as a starting point for reflections on their own positionality and research ethics. As privileged academics whose voices can be given preference over others, they see it as a crucial task for multispecies researchers to remain critical of the "expert" knowledge that co-constitutes their ethnographies.

Unlike Turnbull and Van Patter, anthropologist Parreñas provides an example where she was subjected to violence by an ape. In her blog article *Multispecies*

Ethnography and Social Hierarchy (2015) Parreñas reflects on very personal encounters with a female orangutan. During her research in an orangutan-rehabilitation center in Malaysia, some women with a particular appearance were vulnerable to attacks by a female orangutan, due to a traumatizing event in the ape's past. At the same time, the female orangutan herself was exposed to gendered violence, like forced copulation. Parreñas concludes that "Multispecies ethnography forces us to step outside of an elevator model of ethnography" which doesn't mean to ignore hierarchies but to be sensitive towards multiple hierarchies. Consequently, multispecies ethnographers not only have to reflect on their identity among humans but also enter complex and contradictory relations in more-than-human societies.

Given the importance of reflexivity and positionality in anthropology and the wide acknowledgement that the knowledge individual researchers can gain is always partial, embodied and situated (Haraway 1988), it is not surprising that researchers' identities play an equally decisive role in multispecies ethnography. By widening the scope of investigation beyond the human, it is important to keep in mind that more-than-human societies evolved together and that neither humans nor other-than-humans can serve as an apolitical and ahistorical background for the stories we tell. Rather, a sensitivity towards multiple existing hierarchies, as well as one's own situatedness within a field site, has to be developed. Lastly, researchers are not only accountable for the stories they produce, but also for the political impacts of their non-representational actions during fieldwork. Here, Lonkila (2021) offers a way to engage critically with researcher positionality and power distributions by differentiating between empirical and analytical interferences. Empirical interferences mean to cultivate "the researcher's capacity to respond to the needs and agency of different research subjects" (489) while analytical interferences are concerned with exclusions that can be made visible in knowledge production. Thinking with these concepts can help us to take responsibility for research practices and the exclusions we might reinforce, and also for our choices of representation in the writing process.

The next section continues with similar concerns, paying specific attention to empirical and analytical interferences in the face of multiple marginalizations and competing ethical obligations. Through a focus on cattle and lion exploitation, [author 3] and [author 4] reflect on how multispecies researchers may respond to other-than-

human violence and marginalization when the responsible party itself is subject to ongoing human marginalization.

Marginalized subjects

Case studies - [author 3], [author 4]

A longstanding issue for conservationists in southern Africa and beyond has been the supposed conflict between cattle and the rearing thereof, on the one hand, and wildlife and its conservation on the other. In much of southern Africa land is divided into areas for wildlife and for cattle, separating the two with fences that stretch for thousands of kilometers. Moving away from fortress conservation and towards increased connectivity and community conservation, these fences are increasingly problematized in the KAZA context. Yet, removal of fences can pose challenges for cattle farmers through the increased presence of dangerous wildlife on communal lands, and the predation on livestock and other forms of conflict that follows. In an attempt to combine agriculture and conservation in a single landscape, two conservation NGOs in the country are therefore experimenting with new forms of human-wildlife conflict mitigation. This involves strict communal herding among other measures. The projects also aim to facilitate improved market access for cattle farmers, and thereby improve livelihoods.

In the context of this long-standing antagonism between conservation and agriculture, both [author 3] and [author 4] are doing multispecies fieldwork in the Okavango Delta, following the activities of the mentioned NGOs and the changing relations between wildlife, cattle, herders and farmers. In both cases, the researchers were uncomfortable with some of the situations they found themselves in, being complicit in the exploitation of cattle and wildlife. One such situation was in the milking of cows.

From [author 4]'s fieldnotes:

> Today I milked a cow for the first time. In the late afternoon, after the cows were herded back into their kraal, Naledi sat me next to one of the cows to do the milking. While I at first had gladly accepted the invitation, my excitement and curiosity soon faded when I was faced with the cow herself. Her legs tied together, and her calf

> busy drinking from the other side of where I was sitting, I felt uneasy with taking her teats in my hand. But with Naledi demonstrating how to do it, and a small crowd of others surrounding me and watching, I couldn't help but (half-laughingly) start to milk the cow. While I at first tried to focus on getting the technique right (mostly because I did not want to make a clown out of myself), my attention soon got caught by the calf again. I felt we were competing, and I was not the rightful taker of the milk. This seemed to be confirmed to me a moment later, when the cow swept her tail in my face (to the amusement of the surrounding crowd). These feelings of guilt were confounded with a sense of confusion: the greasy texture of the teats which surprised me, the peeing of the cow while sitting next to her milking (and the comedy that accompanied that), as well as the general out-of-place feeling I was having from being watched by the crowd. All of them mixed with the overall sentiment that came over me as I felt I was complicit in the exploitation of the cow. When I was told to stop, I felt relieved that it was over. (Field note, 19.11.2022)

This experience might feel familiar to multispecies researchers who share similar ethical positions regarding livestock farming practices and animal exploitation. Generally, friction with informants' ethics is common to anthropological fieldwork. This is often seen as productive of insights, forcing the anthropologist to reflect on their own values and frameworks. Indeed, this is the approach that both [author 4] and [author 3] took.

[author 3], for example, was asked by a group of local villagers to help them in their project to fence in lions and market them as a tourist attraction. This was an uncomfortable situation, because she did not want to ignore the villagers' concern, which was rooted in a frustration with the current conflict with lions, nor did she want to support the subordination of lions through their being forced to live in a small fenced area, which would also hinder the work of the NGO she collaborates with. Instead of taking a clear position, she tried to mediate between the two sides and approached the situation as an opportunity for her research to better understand why some people see fences as a means of coexistence with wildlife. Nevertheless, she continued to feel pressured for some time to take a stand, feeling trapped between differing expectations of her informants and her own ethical concerns.

Indeed, while recognizing friction as an opportunity to reflect, [author 3] and [author 4] remained with the question of how to deal with these situations. How does one navigate the situation on the ground and how does one represent practices in research that conflict with one's own ethical position? The projects they followed are clearly concerned with improving human-wildlife coexistence, yet at the same time they are based on the promotion of cattle farming and the accompanying exploitation of cattle. Local people practice cattle husbandry and exploit cattle, and have done so – albeit at the time more extensively – since around the 18th century (Tlou 1972). This is intimately tied to local identities and livelihoods, threatened only by colonial policies and legacies. And finally, lions deserve protection, yet conservation in their name has often not sufficiently recognized the people having to live with them, who in many cases fear for their lives and livelihoods. Because both researchers focus on more-than-human lifeworlds in their studies and come from environments where animal rights and welfare are increasingly important, they struggled to accept cattle exploitation and lion subordination. However, both of them also are careful not to reproduce colonial forms of knowledge production and to respect local practices and views.

Clearly, for both researchers it is important to tend to the concerns of people who are historically and systematically marginalized, and to promote social justice. Especially as *white* researchers from the Global North working in postcolonial contexts, we have a responsibility to engage with these issues. But what if they stand in contrast to other ethical concerns and responsibilities? And what if these concerns have to do with animals, or other species not included as moral subjects in humanistic frameworks?

If we turn to existing multispecies scholarship we find that we are not the first to encounter this dilemma. Various scholars point out the tensions or risks associated with attempting to address multispecies concerns in the context of historical and ongoing dehumanization, coupled as it is to race and other forms of inequality (Gillespie 2018; Celermajer 2021). While most critical scholars steer clear of this fraught territory, others argue that we cannot address one injustice and close our eyes to another.

For an analysis that explicitly addresses this, we turn to Glover's discussion of the controversy over a proposal for an exclusively vegan menu at the Humanities faculty at the University of Cape Town (2017). As he describes, the proposal was opposed by some members of the university on the grounds of it affecting cultural heritage and by extension being racist. Glover counters this argument by arguing that the killing of animals is a gross violation of rights, and overrides a concern with culture. He derives this conclusion from a rule-based moral reasoning, in which the two are weighed up against each other, and in the end one of them overrules the other.

While some may find Glover's argument convincing, we think it is unlikely that those who opposed the proposal will be convinced too. As Chao (2022) has pointed out, in some cases research interlocutors may have their concerns aligned with posthumanism, but this is certainly not always the case. The problem with Glover's argument is that he is too willing to accept the violence that results from subordinating one of the concerns. His form of moral reasoning stands in contrast to an ethics of care promoted by feminist approaches (Gilligan 1982; De la Bellacasa 2017). In an ethics of care, instead of individual agents making abstract ethical choices, relations between those involved are stressed, and ethical choices are always situated and context-dependent. Drawing on this form of relational ethics, Van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster argue that multispecies scholars should "hold on to competing ethical obligations, multiplying perspectives on what counts as 'the good'" (2016, 15). Thus, instead of taking sides, multispecies scholars face the difficult task of navigating the tensions that emerge between different "goods", and have to practice and promote care. In other words, they argue for a tinkering mode of practice that involves negotiation and compromises but that does not easily abandon or condemn things (Mol et al. 2015). Cattle farming and conservation may both have a place in this world, and it is in their interaction that we should look for improvements. The violence that is included in these interactions, as compromises are necessarily made, can never be simply accepted though, and should always remain in sight (Van Dooren 2014). In this sense, the situations that [author 3] and [author 4] were presented with, and the affective responses of the researchers to the violence that was included in these situations, are important to their research and should not be ignored.[iii]

Conclusion

Our research setting, the KAZA TFCA, the world's largest transfrontier conservation area, is a unique experiment in reconfiguring the relations between people, wildlife, livestock, viruses, trees, and a range of other creatures, and sparks hope for some that coexistence can exist in the Anthropocene. The region bears traces of colonial conservation that continue to shape conservation practices, knowledge production and human-environment interactions into the present. While multispecies studies have been reproached for being apolitical, and therefore may be seen as unfit especially in a postcolonial context, we argue that a politicization of multispecies studies has much to offer for research in the KAZA TFCA.

With our case studies and their situatedness in the existing multispecies literature we aimed to foreground the main challenges that we encountered in the field applying a multispecies approach. Centering our field experiences and the literature discussion around the three identified themes of historical legacies, reflexive positionalities, and marginalized subjects, we point out both the contributions and challenges of a political multispecies approach. First, we demonstrated that the stories of more-than-human beings are indissociable from histories of colonialism, capitalism, and racism. A postcolonial multispecies ethnography should, we argue, examine the ways in which people experience systemic loss, violence and destruction in their relationships with each other and with the other-than-human inhabitants of an unequally divided and increasingly endangered environment. Thus, especially in a postcolonial conservation landscape like KAZA TFCA it is important to remain attentive to the diverse histories of different humans and other-than-humans that are often shaped by colonial legacies, asymmetrical hierarchies, and inequalities.

We further stressed that it is not only crucial to pay attention to hierarchies and inequalities between humans and other-than-humans, but it is equally important to reflect on our own positionality in the field and to situate our own identity within those hierarchies of our more-than-human research participants. Multispecies ethnographers often refer to a variety of sources from different disciplines to understand the lifeworlds of more-than-humans. Their role is to select carefully and to critically engage with Western epistemologies and dominant discourses. While natural scientists, governments and NGOs find innovative ways to study wildlife and their

interactions with humans and livestock, they also enact power over local communities, animals and landscapes. Thus, we cannot draw on their knowledge without situating their practices in a wider network of more-than-human power relations.

Lastly, we illustrated the challenge of navigating between different concerns. Multispecies ethnographers are likely to find themselves in dilemmas similar to those described by [author 3] and [author 4]. To raise concerns about animal welfare or animal rights can be fraught when doing research among marginalized people who face regular challenges and conflicts with wildlife, especially when there is a violent historical legacy of *white* Western people (like us) concerned with human-animal relations. In situations where these obligations compete, we conclude that it is not about taking a position for one or the other, but about mediating between and learning from multiple obligations. Here, without ignoring experiences of violence, we should seek to achieve improvements towards multispecies justice.

Taken together, our case studies show that political multispecies studies have much to offer to the study of more-than-human interactions in postcolonial conservation landscapes like the KAZA TFCA. As we have shown, centering trees, elephants, lions, cattle or more other-than-human species does not necessarily exclude the critical examination of social hierarchies, power dynamics or colonial continuities that are so closely tied to conservation in a postcolonial setting. To us, decentering the human does not go hand in hand with the flattening of human differences or the neglect of human concerns. Rather, it is a fruitful approach to study how humans are constituted with other-than-humans in unequal and unjust ways. These inequalities and injustices are historical but continue in the present and are part of the field of power in which multispecies scholars do their research. Tending to these power relations, making them visible and working against them, is of critical importance for multispecies studies if it wants to be relevant in postcolonial conservation landscapes. Only then can the multispecies turn be a step forward for anthropology.

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[i] Besides being part of a postcolonial conservation landscape, our research sites are much more than this. While we find it is important to recognize this multiplicity and want to avoid promoting a too narrow view, for our argument we focus on conservation and the legacies of colonialism, which even today shape many of the human-nature relations in the KAZA TFCA.

[ii] All research participants mentioned in this article have given informed consent. All names are pseudonyms.

[iii] The question of how to communicate these concerns and tensions to different audiences outside academia is left open. We recognize that this is a question that deserves more attention in multispecies scholarship, as little has been done yet to make multispecies research more accessible to policymakers, communities and other research interlocutors.