

Introduction: Multispecies Encounters in Conservation Landscapes in Southern Africa

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This special issue 'Multispecies Encounters in Conservation Landscapes in Southern Africa' aims to investigate the changing conditions of multispecies coexistence in conservation contexts which transform entire ecosystems, including wildlife, plants, microbes and humans. With this focus we draw from the theoretical field of multispecies studies and aim to stimulate and promote scholarly discussions in this field in southern Africa. Departing from the postulate that human lives cannot be studied in isolation from other forms of life (van Dooren et al 2016; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Locke and Münster 2015), we focus on the dynamic ways in which local inhabitants in the conservation areas of southern Africa are coexisting in living landscapes together with the plants, mammals, insects, microbes, and other nonhuman species that compose them. We do so while paying particular attention to the historical and political contexts that shape and are constituted by transforming multispecies relations, and reflecting local perspectives on the practicalities of multispecies coexistence and conflicts. Contributions of this special issue reflect a considerable diversity. First, geographically, they reflect research conducted in Namibia, Zambia, South Africa and Botswana. Second, they include a wide range of nonhuman actors, some of which are often not represented in scholarly social science and humanities studies (including in multispecies studies): mammals, from hippopotami to elephants, but also donkeys, cattle, and antelopes; plants (honeybush); insects and parasites (tsetse flies and trypanosomes); as well as landscapes (wildlife corridors and a river).ⁱ

This introductory chapter starts with an overview of the field of multispecies studies and its critiques to situate the special issue in this literature. Then, it goes on to detail the overall contributions of this collection of papers. This special issue aims to contribute to the field of multispecies studies by developing a distinct southern African perspective. It reflects the specificities of southern African contexts first by historicizing multispecies relations and tracing their genealogies in the contested colonial and postcolonial histories of this region. Second, some contributions delve into the local perspectives on the practicalities of multispecies coexistence on the ground in conservation landscapes. Finally, influenced by political ecology approaches, contributions politicize multispecies relations by highlighting how they connect to power imbalances inherited from the colonial contexts and from socio-economic inequalities. Thus, the special issue answers to the critiques voiced against multispecies approaches of being abstract and far away from local realities, insufficiently embedded in historical and political dynamics, and lacking actionable knowledge to deal with (environmental) crises in practice (Hornborg 2017; Giraud 2019; Büscher 2021).

The multispecies approach: situating our special issue

The field of multispecies studies point to the entanglements of human lives with processes that involve and are set in motion by nonhuman beings – animals, plants, fungi, microorganisms. Doing so, it challenges human exceptionalism and the boundaries of what it means, being humans (Ogden et al. 2013; van Dooren et al. 2016), and redefines human nature as an “interspecies relationship” (Tsing 2012: 141). Beyond the human, the field of multispecies studies also questions the categories with which we are used to think species (Kirksey 2015) and organisms and how they enter relations with humans (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). It contributes therefore to think the world beyond a naturalistic dichotomy between nature and culture (in the wake of Descola 2005; Latour 1993; and others). By decentering the human, multispecies studies shed light on the agency of nonhuman beings, and/or on the agency that emerges from multispecies relations (on relational agency, see Bennett 2010). The multispecies field emphasizes the multiple, the emergent and the relational.

This field, however, covers a wide range of approaches. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing (2015) for example follows the matsutake mushroom from the forests of Oregon in the USA to the forests of Japan. Tsing shows that forests around the world are bound in global capitalist commodity chains that ultimately destroy them. She investigates a “multispecies assemblage” where the lifeways of the mushroom, the mushroom pickers and traders, the pines and the forests where they grow, the scientists, and many others, encounter, entangle, and transform each other. Her ethnography works in a patchwork, across scales, following the trajectories of human and nonhuman actors, to understand how they meet and friction, and what emerges from their encounters (for more on the use of multispecies assemblages as analytical and methodological frameworks see Lacan et al. 2024). Other approaches are immersing in local and/or indigenous understandings of the nonhuman world. In his seminal work *How Forests Think*, Eduardo Kohn (2013) conducts an “anthropology beyond-the-human” that thinks from and with the ontologies of the Runa d’Avilà living in the Amazonian forest. Building on the Runa ontology, Kohn develops a theory of thought as multispecies communication, understood as the growth of living beings in response to signs that exceed by far the symbolic realm of the human language. With his theory, Kohn succeeds to conceptualize humans in the web of their relations with other living beings. Deborah Bird Rose also thinks with Indigenous philosophies to situate humans in their connections with a living world that also has agency and sentience, in contrast to a Western thought dominated by dualities like culture/nature and mind/body (Rose 2005; see also Plumwood 2002 cited by Rose). Immersing in Aboriginal philosophy and aesthetic, Rose’s work calls for noticing the multispecies worlds that have been trashed in the Anthropocene (Rose 2017), and for decolonized environmental ethics that run counter the enduring violent marginalization of Aboriginal people (Rose 1999, 2021). Other scholars have also looked at the power imbalances destroying or underlying multispecies worlds. Eben Kirksey has shown the overlaps between the destruction of multispecies worlds and the creation and maintenance of (racialized) social injustices, calling for multispecies justice (Kirksey 2017; see also Chao et al. 2022). Maan Barua (2016) points to the nonhuman labor of lions commodified and exploited in the Indian tourism industry. Ursula Münster (2016) analyzes the political ecology of human-elephant collaborations in South India, which

has been historically shaped by extraction and conservation and continues to contribute to wildlife management, albeit often invisibly.

Multispecies studies involve contrasting and at times highly innovative methodologies that cross over disciplinary boundaries (see Bubandt et al. 2023). Multispecies ethnographers are prompt to immerse in nonhuman worlds (van Dooren et al. 2016). Some draw on methods from the biological sciences. For example, Heather Swanson collaborates with biologists to study salmon scales and ear bones (otoliths) which represent a kind of fish diary, recording events in the lives of the salmon. With an anthropological eye, she analyzes scales and bones to study the multispecies encounters that make up salmon worlds (Swanson 2017). Andrew Mathews, forester and anthropologist, also uses botanical methods to study the forms of vegetation and landscapes and analyze them as records of the past, combined to ethnographic data to document the multispecies histories of Italian forest landscapes (Mathews 2018). John Hartigan (2021) employs ethological methods to learn how wild horses in Galicia interact with humans. He gives a convincing argument that anthropologists can learn much from the observation protocols of zoologists studying the sociability and culture of animals.

Drawing from multispecies studies, this special issue focuses on the ways in which human lives are entangled with other lifeways, in dynamic multispecies assemblages, at different geographical scales and in history. Without dismissing the importance of studying how human lives are practiced, enacted, lived, we aim to look at how they unfold with and are shaped by other living beings – plants, mammals, insects, microbes. Not limited to the description of the socio-economic or institutional impacts of conservation projects on human livelihoods and social organizations, the contributions attempt to document how humans are “becoming with” (Haraway 2008) the other species made more numerous and more present in rural areas through these conservation projects, and that might constrain and challenge but also empower and offer new opportunities to human existences. Therefore, in this special issue, authors pay attention to the intimacies, synergies but also the conflicts between humans and other species, in the past, the present, and in emerging futures, and in the political ecological context of conservation in the region.

Ethnography is particularly well suited to describe the practical and locally-embedded ways in which more-than-human coexistence are taking place providing ground for empathetic observation and immersion in local perspectives. Historiography is also helpful to highlight multispecies histories. Rereading archival sources against the grain, animals are often the topic of communication; they have been poached, need vaccinations, are photographed by trophy hunters. Their histories, intertwined and part of human histories, can be traced. Beyond archival methods, oral histories can capture rural people’s often-intense recollections of encounters, conflicts and cooperation with animals. Coming from the anthropological and historical fields, the contributions to this project draw heavily on ethnographic methods, based on in-depth studies that emphasize local perspectives, as well as historical methods, especially archival research, that situate multispecies relations in their historical depth. Contributions also draw from different sources of data and materials – for example grey literature, accounts from the natural sciences documenting the ways of life of nonhuman species.

Doing so, they put different knowledges into dialogue, reaching across disciplinary boundaries, while remaining firmly rooted in the anthropological and historical fields.

Nevertheless, the field of multispecies studies has also been deeply criticized. Alf Hornborg (2017) argues that multispecies studies reflect the gaze of an urban elite and romanticizes the relations between humans and nonhumans, far removed from local realities and glossing over social-economic and political inequalities. Scholarship on the “more-than-human” and multispecies relations have also been criticized for reflecting mostly Western voices and lacking in-depth consideration for indigenous perspectives, even when the ideas developed in this field resonate with indigenous ideas and worldviews (TallBear 2011; Todd 2016; Adams 2019). For Bram Büscher, studies of the nonhuman turn have been “selectively ahistorical” (Büscher 2021: 6): he argues that multispecies studies emphasize entanglements between beings but do not analyze thoroughly enough the historical conditions and political contexts that brought about these multispecies relations. Kopnina (2017) critiques that multispecies ethnography does not adequately address violence against animals, exploitation and extinction and exaggerates companionship and conviviality. Lastly, multispecies studies have been criticized for their inability to deal with crises (also addressed by Hornborg 2017). Giraud (2019) points out that, by emphasizing complexity and entanglements, these studies might hamper the neat identification of culprits and responsibilities and therefore risk paralyzing political action. This special issue offers a counterpoint to these criticisms, as it proposes to think with multispecies and political ecology approaches from the southern African context, situating multispecies relations distinctively in their local histories, social-ecological settings, and political dynamics.

A southern African perspective

The opportunities and challenges of conservation in southern Africa have raised considerable interest among social scientists. Their publications have covered a wide range of 20th and 21st century conservation models, from national parks to community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), investigating their impacts, prospects and limitations. These conservation initiatives have been studied from the angle of changing human socio-economic conditions of living, shifting local social institutions, politics and power dynamics in colonial and postcolonial contexts, as well as contestations of knowledge and identities in globalized settings (for example, among many others: Murombedzi 1999; Magome and Murombedzi 2002; Beinart 2008; Matose and Watts 2010; Mavhunga 2014; Mosimane and Silva 2015; Matose 2016; Carruthers 2017; Ramutsindela et al. 2016; Mosimane and Breen 2020; Ramutsindela et al. 2022). Political strife, impoverishment and loss of access to land and natural resources have been constant themes in social science publications dealing with conservation in colonial and postcolonial southern Africa (Bollig et. al 2023, Bollig and Krause 2023: 240-254). In these conservation contexts, shifting relations between people and other species have only been scrutinized in limited ways, mostly focusing on human-wildlife conflicts, their impacts on human livelihoods and institutional mechanisms to tackle them (see for instance Munang’andu et al. 2012, Naidoo et al. 2018, Schnegg and Kiaka 2018, Stoldt et al. 2019 or Störmer et al. 2019). In short, most of these valuable publications are centred on the human.

This special issue aims to develop a distinctive southern African perspective to the field of multispecies studies. There is an emerging scholarship of multispecies research in

southern Africa. Within this scholarship, Marcus Baynes-Rock and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (2017) investigated the social engagements between Ju/'hoan and lions in the Kalahari in the 1950s showing that human communities are more-than-human and redrawing the contours of what constitutes the social. In his study of the conservation of white lions in South Africa, Harry Wels attempts to understand and take the lions subjectivities seriously (Wels 2018). His approach to multispecies ethnography is immersive, spending time with white lions, and inspired by San tracking techniques (Wels 2020). In the Kalahari Desert, Pierre du Plessis's work (2022) also engages with San practices of tracking to understand the multispecies relations that make the landscape. This special issue aims to build on this scholarship by focusing on multispecies relations as they unfold in southern African contexts. Beyond applying a multispecies approach, the collected contributions aim to think with the specificities of these contexts and from a southern African point of view.

First of all, specificities of the southern African context include the long history of state-led conservation in the region, rooted in colonial visions and practices, and embedded in enduring power imbalances across local, national, regional and global scales (Murombedzi 2003; Mavhunga 2014; Koot et al. 2022; Ramutsindela et al. 2022; Thakholi et al. 2024). Thinking multispecies relations from a southern African perspective therefore cannot leave aside this politically-laden historical context. Considering this politicized context, many contributions draw not only on multispecies approaches but also on political ecology. Moreover, southern Africa is particular for standing at the forefront of conservationist initiatives, where conservation holds promises of both human development and the preservation of ecosystems. In this context, conservation is also laden with hope and aspirations for the future, not only for national governments, but also for international organizations, and practitioners operating at local level, as well as for the local communities who see new opportunities and challenges emerging with conservation projects implemented in their backyards. With this collection of articles, therefore, we aim to scrutinize the concrete changes at local level in the multispecies relations that make up human lives in these conservation areas, and situate them in this highly political context.

Historicizing multispecies relations in southern Africa

Animals, insects, parasites and plants have histories too; histories that are not reducible to evolutionary changes and adaptation to changing environmental conditions, as demonstrated by the emerging scholarship on African multispecies histories (see Swart 2010; Gibson 2018; Glover 2021; Jacobs 2021; Aderinto 2022). Several contributions of this special issue propose a historical analysis of multispecies relations in southern Africa. Sandra Swart reconsiders human-baboon relations within a historical *longue durée*. Doing so, she prompts us to look at history as more-than-human and highlights the necessity to think at the interface of two changing cultures, the cultures of humans and baboons, to develop conservation approaches that consider baboons (and more widely animals) as "creatures of history". Léa Lacan focuses on the historical emergence of a more-than-tsetse assemblage in the gaze of colonial experts in Zambia from the late 19th century until 1959. She explores the complexity of multispecies relations underlying the tsetse and trypanosomiasis "problem" mediated by colonial stakeholders to trace the intertwined history of wildlife conservation and tsetse control. Hauke-Peter Vehrs focuses on the history of local and

trophy hunting of the hippopotami in north-eastern Namibia. He combines a historical perspective on hunting as mediated by colonial actors with empirical material on local hunting to scrutinize current conservation policies and the colonial continuities that continue shape the lives of the residents. Luregn Lenggenhager and colleagues focus on the intertwined histories of humans and donkeys in and around Etosha in central Namibia. The authors investigate the ambiguous position of domestic donkeys, a neglected species, yet that followed humans in their travels and influenced their relations with other livestock and wildlife species. All four contributions aim to trace the genealogies of multispecies relations, scrutinizing how humans become with animals, wildlife or livestock, as well as with insects and parasites. They situate current multispecies relations in the context of colonial and postcolonial visions, knowledge, practices and policies that have shaped them.

Situating multispecies relations in their local social-ecological contexts

Thinking from and with local and indigenous knowledge and philosophies is crucial for de-centering Western views on the environment (Rose 2005; Mavhunga 2018; Adams 2019; Ferdinand 2021) and for reframing conservation and environmental governance in ways that support local multispecies communities (Mabele et al. 2022). In conservation landscapes of southern Africa, this requires to understand and immerse in the local realities of multispecies relations. Against the critique that purports that multispecies studies are often too far removed from practical realities on the ground, the contribution by Romie Nghitevelekwa and colleagues focuses on the interactions between a Khwe community and antelopes in the Bwabwata National Park in north-eastern Namibia. They explore the sociocultural significance of antelopes in the Khwe's lifeworld and call for a community-based conservation that considers wildlife beyond its ecological and economic importance. The contribution by Sthembile Ndwandwe and colleagues investigates the case of honeybush cultivation in Haarlem, South Africa. With an interdisciplinary perspective that combines anthropology with plant ecology, the authors engage with the multispecies relations that make local honeybush ecologies and the socio-economic relations between Haarlem honeybush harvesters and the plant, to examine the impacts of honeybush domestication and commodification on these relations. The authors delve into perspectives of Haarlemers to analyze how their ways of relating to the honeybush have change along with these transformations.

These contributions focus on multispecies relations as they unfold in practice on the ground, from the perspectives of those who are living with the antelopes, or the honeybush. They aim to analyze how these multispecies relations transform in dynamic socio-economic contexts, whether it be community-based conservation in north-eastern Namibia or the establishment of honeybush plantations to support the plant's commodification in Haarlem, South Africa.

Politicizing multispecies relations in southern Africa

In reaction to Hornborg's and Büscher's critiques, this special issue aims to demonstrate that a focus on multispecies relations does not preclude an analysis of their political dimensions. It builds on a scholarship that has shown the overlaps between the domination over local and indigenous groups and the domination of nature following both colonial and capitalist logics (Plumwood 2003; Rose 2004; Ferdinand 2021). All contributions highlight the politics of conservation that underly multispecies

relations in southern Africa. A southern African perspective on multispecies studies necessarily considers the political legacies of the colonial history and its enduring effects in the region (see Lacan, Vehrs, and Lavelle in particular). It also considers the current negotiation of policies, knowledge and practices in conservation landscapes and questions of environmental justice (see also Ndwandwe and colleagues on the impacts of honeybush cultivation on the historical and ongoing socio-economic marginalization of Haarlemers). Michael Bollig focuses on wildlife corridors, key instruments to support wildlife mobility, ecosystem connectivity, and tourism in the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA). With an approach at the crossing of multispecies studies and political ecology, he explores the contested nature of wildlife corridors that engage complex multispecies relations. The contribution by Jessica Lavelle investigates human-river entanglements among the Mayeyi people in the Kwando-Linyanti wetlands in northern Namibia. Her case study traces the formation of multispecies entanglements of the Mayeyi in a riverine environment in the 18th and 19th century and analyzes their violent disruption as a consequence of colonialism. Finally, the contribution by Paula Alexiou and colleagues discusses the ethics of conducting multispecies ethnography in conservation landscapes in southern Africa. They reflect on three ethical issues that emerged from their research in the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (Namibia, Zambia and Botswana). These include how to deal with the historical legacies in conservation, with their positionalities as researchers, and finally with the marginalization of subjects, human and nonhuman, who are involved in their studies. This contribution raises key questions about multispecies justice in the practice of research.

Multispecies Encounters in Conservation Landscapes: thinking from southern Africa

Overall, by historicizing multispecies relations in the conservation landscapes of southern Africa, situating them in their local social-ecological contexts and highlighting their political significance, this special issue aims to provide two main perspectives. First, it explores new possibilities for the field of multispecies studies that address its main critiques, namely an ahistorical and apolitical romanticizing of multispecies entanglements. It departs from the acknowledgement that multispecies approaches from a southern African perspective, one which remains rarely represented, necessarily means conducting politicized multispecies enquiries. Second, this special issue hopes to contribute to the movement towards decolonial approaches to environmental, conservation and multispecies studies. It does so as several contributions are committed to unveil the colonial contexts within which conservation and realities of multispecies coexistence in conservation landscapes have emerged and developed, and highlight enduring colonial legacies. It does so as well by making local realities of conservation and multispecies interactions visible. Ultimately, it calls for thinking further from and with southern African perspectives to enhance scholarly understandings of multispecies worlds.

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ⁱ This special issue grew out of an idea that originated in a panel organized by the co-editors at the "Anthropology and Conservation" conference of the Royal Anthropological Institute in October 2021. The panel, entitled "Conservation of what and environmental justice for whom? Multispecies relations in conservation landscapes of the 21st century" later led to a workshop focusing on multispecies encounters in conservation landscapes in southern Africa. The workshop took place in February 2023 at the University of Namibia (UNAM), Windhoek. It was jointly organized by the UNAM and the University of Cologne, facilitated by the Collaborative Research Center 228 "Future Rural Africa" of the Universities of Cologne and Bonn, and the project "Rewilding the Anthropocene" funded by the European Research Council. For two days, scholars from universities in Namibia, South Africa, and Germany, all working in southern Africa, engaged in intensive, in-depth discussions that laid the common groundwork for our special issue: investigating the significance of nature conservation for multispecies relations situated in their local social-ecological, political and historical contexts.