INTRODUCTION: Elephant (Research) Routes

Integrating Elephants into More-than-Human Narratives

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Abstract: Placing the special issue within the historiography of human–elephant relationships, the introduction addresses the challenges associated with the integration of elephants into academic narratives. It pays special attention to the epistemological and disciplinary opportunities presenting themselves when building such more-than-human narratives. The integration of elephants, in and of themselves, into the academic narrative is reliant on ethological, biological, ecological, and zooarchaeological research, which itself is a historical and situated scientific endeavour. Anthropological and historiographic methods developed in this special issue deepen our understanding of human-elephant relationships. By critically addressing research narratives concerning elephants, this introduction contributes to an epistemological rereading of scientific narratives on elephant and wildlife management to strengthen multidisciplinary dialogue and promote co-existence.

Keywords: *elephants, animal history, animal biography, coexistence, human–wildlife interaction, zoos, ivory trade, captivity, working animals*

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In the dead of night in 1869, a herd of nearly seventy elephants rested in a mango grove in the proximity of the East Indian Railway line. Suddenly, they were roused not by hunters but by the red glow and hiss of a passing locomotive. According to colonial newspapers, one tusker broke free of his chains and lunged at the steel monster—only to be crushed by the very engine he sought to confront.[1] Historian of technology Nitin Sinha demonstrates that the circulation of this story within British media showcased how the introduction of industrial modernity to India was presented as a clash between civilization and wildness, here depicted as an engine versus elephant trope.[2] However, if we go beyond the layer of representation and its multiple meanings, this violent encounter illustrates a broader pattern: elephants as agents negotiating their routes in landscapes increasingly dominated by human infrastructure. Their paths—once continuous, seasonal, and socially patterned—intersected violently with colonial technologies and processes that radically changed their environment. From this moment, we can read a layered history of mobility: the trains' linear tracks imposed a new order, while the elephants' disrupted trajectory reminds us that animal routes are not merely obstacles but historical records worth attending to if one wants to underscore the entanglement of forest, infrastructure, and empire.

This traffic accident was not an isolated event. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were multiple collisions between elephants and trains reported across South East Asia. For example, historian Faizah Zakaria recounts a similar incident from 1894 in Malaysia when a bull charged at a train. She notes that the episode "was remarkable for the way in which the elephant's personality morphed over the ensuing decades": from being cast as an obstacle on the railway line to being remembered as a brave hero defending his herd—an attribution of anthropomorphic agency granted only once the animal had already perished.[3] In this way, the author points to the clash between admiration for dead elephants and the annoyance with living pachyderms disturbing agriculturalists and planters.

1 "The Elephant and the Railway", *The Glasgow Daily Herald* 9 February 1869, 2.

2 Sinha, "Engines vs. Elephants", 125.

3 Zakaria, *Camphor Tree*, 180.

Moreover, this pattern of negotiating shared space across local and colonial pathways can be superimposed on current debates on human-elephant conflict. According to the Asian Elephant Transport Working Group's 2024 report, 355 elephants died in train collisions between 1987 and April 2023 in India alone.[4] In the repetition of similar narratives that could be grouped within the theme of "elephant modernity",[5] we can observe a clear pattern of understanding and storying elephants in close relation to their natural habitat, the incursion of technology, and different human regimes of inhabiting and exploiting shared landscapes. In researching elephants, many such patterns can be observed, whether with respect to elephant mobility (pachyderms as premodern war-machines or modern heroes charging at trains) or captivity (rogue bulls, zoo darlings, and circus killers). From these patterns, clear research routes emerge, rendering elephants as particularly potent subjects for scholarly analyses in history, ethnography, multispecies anthropology, art history, geography, and other disciplines within the humanities.

With this collection of articles on both Asian and African elephants,[6] contributing to a growing body of humanities and social science scholarship on human–elephant relationships,[7] we aim to further integrate historical and contemporary elephants into the current academic narratives about them. This means considering elephants as actors of the programs and institutions they have been conscripted into, rather than passive objects of control and knowledge. Seminal academic works demonstrate the role Asian and African elephants played in shaping cultures, economies, landscapes, and politics, including beyond their native ranges.[8] The contribution of this special

4 Dodd et al., *Handbook*, 16.

5 Smyer Yü, "Collapsing Elephant Clime".

6 This special issue builds on a series of online workshops organized in the wake of a conference held on June 23, 2023, at the University of Lyon. We thank all the participants of these workshops, as well as the contributors to this special issue, for the contributions they made to this introduction and the special issue.

7 Wemmer and Christen, *Elephants and Ethics*; Locke and Buckingham, *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence*; Keil and Rahmat, *Composing Worlds*; Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*.

8 Barua, "Bio-geo-graphy"; Nance, *Entertaining Elephants*; Rothfels, *Elephant Trails*; Saha, *Colonizing Animals*.

issue to the growing body of work about elephants and their relations to people is underscored by three central features. First, the contributions recognize elephants as individuals with their own life-worlds and experiences, as well as members of communities with specific forms of sociality, members of species, and parts of ecosystems. Such a perspective, increasingly called for by elephant scholars,[9] allows for a recalibration of the polarized debates on human–elephant conflicts and cohabitation. Second, the framework of environmental (in)justice offers an analytical tool for addressing asymmetrical power relationships involved in the management of, and cohabitation with, captive and wild elephants.[10] Unequal relationships between humans and elephants, and among humans encountering elephants, are exacerbated by gender, race, and class differences, especially in (post)colonial contexts. Furthermore, historical, long-term perspectives, by accounting for the relationship between precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial patterns of elephant exploitation, avoid essentializing certain categories of human actors as elephant stewards or destroyers. Third, the contributions respond to the heuristic and epistemological challenges associated with the integration of elephant and social justice perspectives into academic narratives. Developing multidisciplinary insights that draw from political ecology, conservation biology, ethological studies, Indigenous knowledges, archival research, and zoo studies, this collection contributes to the development of reflexive methodologies for more-than-human research.[11]

This special issue gathers contributions from historians, anthropologists, and political scientists, all reflecting on how elephants shape our interdisciplinary research routes. Cherry Leonardi examines the behaviours and experiences of elephants within and throughout hunting narratives in southern Sudan from the 1840s to the 1870s.

9 Banerjee and Sinha, "Political and Affective Ecologies", 40; Münster, "Challenges of Coexistence".

10 Nygren, "Eco-Imperialism"; Massard-Guilbaud and Rodger, *Environmental and Social Justice*; Barua, "Bio-geo-graphy".

11 See also Locke and Buckingham, *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence*; Lainé, Keil, and Rahmat, *Composing Worlds with Elephants*; Lorimer, "Elephants as Companion Species"; Barua, "Bio-geo-graphy".

She demonstrates that, even in culturally loaded narratives written by their killers, elephants display their own agency, attesting to deep cross-species communication. Oliver Hochadel traces the biography of a captive elephant (ca. 1873–1914) who gained celebrity status at the Barcelona Zoo from 1892 under the name Avi. Hochadel's article sheds light on the tensions between public discourses and cultural representations of captive elephants and their lived experiences. Jonathan Saha explores the fate of working elephants in Myanmar at the end of the British Empire. By uncovering material and ideational continuities between colonial and postcolonial elephant management policies, his contribution opens up paths toward a more-than-human decolonization. Emelien Devos analyses the historical construction of elephant paths and their co-evolution under anthropogenic influence in present-day western Tanzania, as well as their social and cultural meanings for the Bende and Tongwe communities, thereby integrating both elephant histories and environmental justice issues. Ursula Frank and Suma T.R. reconstruct the relational biographies of three contemporary elephants living in the western Ghats of south India. By integrating their individual histories within broader wildlife management patterns, they demonstrate the need to re-connect the individual, population, and species levels in order to better understand the nature of wildlife management and conservation programs. Finally, the afterword by Nigel Rothfels brings another elephant personality into focus, reflecting on how a bull named Herman / Ziegfeld / Ziggy travelled through paths that so many other pachyderms before him had walked — worn trails between circus lots, menageries, zoos, and the fragile spaces where human fascination met elephant endurance.

All the contributions to this collection develop innovative research routes for integrating historical and contemporary elephants within academic narratives about them. In so doing, they shed light on the way more-than-human histories enrich academic research, prompting a re-evaluation of both methodologies and research results, and encouraging further exploration of the asymmetrical relationships between humans and elephants, as well as the unequal power relationships among human actors involved in elephant management.

While focusing on localized contexts, taken together, these articles allow for comparisons and the identification of global patterns related to the development of animal labour, hunting, wildlife trade, international conservationism, and mass entertainment. In what follows, we would like to guide the readers through some of the central themes that emerge throughout this collection, namely commodification and agency, violence and care, as well as epistemic and ontological structures shaping co-existence with elephants. We hope that they will provide signposts for reimagining our shared trajectories with elephants, encouraging readers to trace not only how these relations have been forged in the past and present, but how they might unfold in more just and attentive futures.

Commodifying Elephants

Royal hunts and the use of African elephants as tribute and display animals were widespread in ancient Assyria and Egypt.[12] In southern, central, and eastern Africa, elephant hunting constituted a culturally and nutritionally significant practice and, in some contexts, an important economic activity for hunter communities. From at least the seventh century CE, east African traders exported ivory to India, China, and Europe. The scale of extraction remained relatively limited until the expansion of the global ivory trade—first, in the early modern period, driven by the growth of Portuguese and Dutch commercial networks, and then, from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onward, with the consolidation of colonial rule, the expansion of Swahili and Western trading networks, and the rise of mass mechanized production of ivory goods in Europe and North America.[13] Historians have highlighted both material continuities linking precolonial and colonial ivory networks, and the disruptions introduced by colonization, with the gradual colonial monopolization of the trade and a marked increase in the level of extraction.[14] Throughout the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial eras, moral considerations and associated hunting

12 Trautmann, "War Elephants", 114; Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings*, 70–79.

13 MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*, 54–166; Alpers, *Ivory and Slaves*; Chaiklin, "Ivory in World History"; Leonardi, "Extraordinarily Inconspicuous".

14 MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*, 85–166; Harms, *River of Wealth*; *Land of Tears*.

rituals (see Devos, this issue), as well as material constraints—albeit relative and partially offset by the spread of modern guns from the nineteenth century onwards—largely prevented an industrial scale of exploitation by African hunter societies, even if politically-centralized African regimes engaged in large-scale appropriation of elephants. The demand for ivory products in Europe and North America, combined with colonial claims over natural resources, deepened the connection between human economies and elephant lives. As colonial systems reorganized access to land and wildlife, elephants became increasingly enmeshed in circuits of value that were indifferent to their ecological and social rhythms. The resulting intensification of hunting not only imperilled their populations but also disrupted the cultural practices, subsistence strategies, and ritual obligations of communities whose lives were historically entwined with these animals.[15]

The history of Asian elephants in South and South East Asia reveals both similar and distinctive patterns. The capture and training of elephants in Asia are ancient practices, with the earliest evidence of taming dating to the Indus Civilization, in ca. 2200–1900 BCE.[16] From around 1000 BCE, kings in the North Indian states relied on war elephants and, in ancient periods, the use of trained, war pachyderms "dominates and conditions all other uses of elephants", including their employment for transport, hunt, ceremonial, and performative purposes. Over the following centuries, the deployment of war elephants supported military expansion and spread across Iran, Egypt, Syria, Carthage, Rome, south India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Java. As Thomas R. Trautmann argues, the regal production of war elephants marginalized competing uses, particularly elephant hunting, which was refashioned as a hunt while riding elephants.[17] In Sri Lanka, however, elephants were also exploited for their ivory from at least the second century CE, which was traded across Asia and China.[18]

15 MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*; Beinart and Hughes, *Environment and Empire*, 61–8; Kelly, *Consuming Ivory*; Szczygielska, "Reading Teeth".

16 Sukumar, "Human–Elephant Relationship", 33; but see Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings*, 87–95.

17 Trautmann, "Deep History of Mahouts", 347; Trautmann, "War Elephants", 113–5; Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings*; Lim, "Mouth of the Mahout".

18 Chaiklin, "Ivory in Early Modern Ceylon".

The early modern and modern periods marked a transition in the scale of the trade. The Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) appropriated and reshaped regal Indian traditions of elephant use to stabilize imperial expansion and consolidate state control, thereby intensifying the role of elephants as power symbols and utilitarian instruments.[19] Building on Indian and Mughal precedents, European powers — the Portuguese from the sixteenth century, the Dutch through the Dutch East India Company (VOC, Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie) in the seventeenth century, and the British from the late eighteenth century onward — further appropriated and transformed regional elephant economies. They expanded both the extraction and trade of ivory (destined for China, Japan, India and Europe) and the trade in live elephants (within South Asia and increasingly across imperial networks).[20] In India, Burma, Ceylon, and Siam, British colonial rule dramatically intensified the capture of elephants for hunting, transport, freight, and labour, particularly in the construction of railways and roads and in the timber industry.[21] Extracted elephants were thus mobilized to facilitate the extraction of other natural resources for both local consumption and export. As Saha argues in this issue, the value of elephants, conceptualized as *undead capital*, "was mostly as means of production", and working elephants played a crucial role in processes of capital accumulation.[22] As had been the case since the early modern era, colonizers both monopolized wild elephants and delegated the harnessing of their labour to Indigenous workers. Thus, Indigenous techniques and expertise, reshaped under colonial rule, fed into transcultural imperial networks, while local workers bore the brunt of the intensified extraction of elephants.[23] Furthermore, in addition to deforestation caused by the elephant-based timber industry, the conversion of forests into ecologically and biologically impoverished plantations and rice paddies

19 Sivasundaram, "Trading knowledge", 48–50; Buckhingham, "Symbolism and Power".

20 Chaiklin, "Ivory in Early Modern Ceylon"; Chaiklin, "Ivory in World History", 533; Sivasundaram, "Trading Knowledge", 32–42; Lorimer and Whatmore, "After the 'King of Beasts'".

21 MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*, 183–86; Saha, *Colonizing Animals*; Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings*, 318–29.

22 Saha, *Colonizing Animals*, 30–39, 51–68, 110–14.

23 Sivasundaram, "Trading Knowledge"; Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, "Nāgādhyakshaçaritha", 200–201; Saha, *Colonizing Animals*, 37–38.

in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and south India further contributed to the destruction of elephant habitats from the late nineteenth century onwards (Frank and Suma, this issue; Saha, this issue).[24]

In both Africa and Asia, the extractive nature of human-elephant relationships and the use of elephants in "the performance of colonial power"[25] have deep historical roots. Building on these precolonial extraction networks, colonial actors expanded and intensified forms of commodification that underpinned imperial expansion and colonial economies. They also introduced new forms of use, such as large-scale timber extraction, "sport hunting",[26] and the global trade in live elephants to supply the growing Western entertainment industry, exemplified by the success of zoos and circuses from the nineteenth century onwards. Yet, these "invented traditions" were also intertwined with older practices, including long-standing elephant hunts, princely hunts and shikar in India,[27] the display of elephants in princely menageries in Asia and Europe,[28] and possibly early Indian circus-like performances.[29]

While the commodification of animals is a central aspect of coloniality,[30] political independence did not entail a transformation of the utilitarian ethos underlying human-animal relationships, nor a reduction in the scale of extraction. Intensive, industrial uses had been deeply integrated into colonial and world economies during the previous decades. Saha shows how nationalist efforts to promote economic democracy in Myanmar relied on the use of elephants — and, more broadly, on animal and environmental "resources" — further encouraged by economic rivalries between political factions. Accordingly, working elephants in independent Myanmar "were still tethered to the production of export commodities" and "[t]he change for elephants was mostly in the humans empowered to

24 See also: Saha, *Colonizing Animals*, 33; Münster, "Challenges of Coexistence", 280–82.

25 Saha, *Colonizing Animals*, 43.

26 Chaiklin, "Ivory in Early Modern Ceylon", 53–54, 57; MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*.

27 Trautmann, "Deep History of Mahouts", 61; MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*, 168–76.

28 Nance, *Entertaining Elephants*.

29 Olivelle, "Science of Elephants", 84.

30 See also Barnard, *Imperial Creatures*; Saha, *Colonizing Animals*.

control and kill them" (Saha, this issue). Thus, in this domain as in many other environmental ones, decolonization has remained incomplete,[31] especially if we take the perspective of both human and animal labour into account. From the late twentieth century onward, bans on elephant timber logging in Asia and technological changes led to a decline in the number of elephants employed in the logging industry and to the emergence of new sectors, such as commercial pageantry and elephant-based tourism. These more recent forms of use involve prolonged confinement, high turnover of elephant drivers (mahouts), growing socio-economic precarity, and an increase in elephant attacks, including fatal ones.[32] As a consequence of (post) colonial land use patterns and global capitalism, many precarious farmers and elephants in both Asia and Africa have to share tightened, fragmented, and densely populated landscapes.

A History of Violence: Beyond Agency and Structure

Finding a balance between power structures and agency is a pipe dream, especially in animal studies. The asymmetries are vast and historically entrenched—few animals have been more deeply caught in human political economies than elephants, who have been conscripted into labour, hunted for ivory, displayed as imperial spectacle, and pursued as conservation icons. Yet scholars have increasingly emphasized that acknowledging these asymmetries need not reduce elephants to passive objects of human intention. Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* invites us to see agency not as an autonomous power that beings possess, but as something that *emerges relationally*: through encounters, frictions, and shared practices that bind species together.[33] Agency, in this sense, is not heroic resistance but the capacity to shape outcomes through presence, movement, and affect. Susan Pearson's work extends this insight to historical analysis, demonstrating how animals under the most restrictive regimes—from circuses and menageries to early welfare

31 Ross, *Ecology and Power.*

32 Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, "Nāgādhyakshaçaritha", 208–9; Crawley, "Mahout–Elephant Relationships", 213–14, 222.

33 Haraway, *When Species Meet.*

systems — nonetheless influenced human decisions, institutional designs, and legal frameworks.[34] Elephants exemplify this dynamic. Whether refusing to obey handlers in timber camps, re-routing hunters through the density of the forest, interrupting colonial transportation lines, or compelling conservationists to build corridors around their habitual paths, elephants continually make themselves felt in the material and political worlds constructed around them. Seen through these lenses, the question is not how to balance overwhelming structures, be it colonialism, global capitalism, or conservation bureaucracies, with discrete "acts" of elephant autonomy; rather, it is how to trace the multispecies negotiations that occur within these structures.

Yet, the focus on agency in the animal turn, on elephants as "companion species",[35] and on hunting as "reciprocity"[36] carries the risk of marginalizing the asymmetries that structure human–elephant relations.[37] Notably, the agency perspective dominates in studies on captive elephants, whereas wild elephants' agency is more commonly framed as a "problem" within the discourse of human–elephant conflict. All contributors to this special issue address both the direct and indirect forms of human violence experienced by historical and contemporary elephants. Precolonial hunting had a lasting impact on individual elephants and entire multigenerational herds. For instance, the fact that the Bende and Tongwe communities in West Tanzania hunted elephants along their main routes (Devos, this issue) may have contributed to reshaping elephant networks before the colonial era. In South and South East Asia, elephant capture is intrinsically violent, as it "abruptly sever[s] elephants' preexisting […] ties" with their communities and environments (Saha) and relies on captive elephants as intermediaries to subdue their wild counterparts. Subsequent taming is achieved through the mental and psychological "breaking" of elephants to subdue their will. While

34 Pearson, "Speaking Bodies"; Pearson, *Rights of the Defenseless.*

35 Locke, "Introduction", 8.

36 Lorimer and Whatmore, "After the 'King of Beasts'".

37 See also: Lorimer, "Elephants as Companion Species", and Jepson et al., "Intradisciplinary Bio-geography", 172.

practices vary according to individual idiosyncrasies, cultural specificities, and environmental contexts, and while certain management and working routines are less violent than others, all are mediated through restraint devices, such as chains, fetters and bells, and coercive instruments, including sticks, goads, and ankuses.[38] The latter, a sharp tool whose form "has remained virtually unchanged over nearly two thousand years",[39] enables mahouts to control elephants by inflicting pain on sensitive parts of their bodies and, subsequently, through its mere visual presence, as elephants remember the pain inflicted.[40]

From the colonial era onward, direct violence combined with large-scale anthropogenic environmental changes generated contradictory regimes of both destruction and protection. These regimes were marked by territorializing discourses and practices aimed at separating human and elephant spaces. Drawing on Western hunting traditions as well as regional elephant hunting and capture reserves,[41] they flourished under (post)colonial polities, despite their inherent contradiction with historical human and elephant geographies. Pachyderms create webs of paths through the routine, repeated use of itineraries that most effectively connect places and resources. Transmitted across generations, these paths have often been used by humans for their own movements and travels because of their practicality in rural and sylvan environments. Moreover, given the risks associated with human-elephant encounters, these paths have long co-determined human land-use patterns, including agricultural settlement, as well as movements, structured seasonally and according to night-day elephant rhythms. (Post)colonial wildlife management regimes have frequently—sometimes brutally—reshaped these intertwined animal and human historical geographies (see Devos, this issue).[42] Furthermore, rather than

38 Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, "Nāgādhyakshaçaritha", 201–209.

39 Menon and Sinha, "Tusks of Wisdom", 131; Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings,* 65–68.

40 Nance, *Entertaining Elephants*, 86–91.

41 MacKenzie, *Empire of Nature*; Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings*.

42 Barua, "Bio-geo-graphy". On elephant paths, see Vanleeuwe and Gautier-Hion, "Forest Elephant Paths"; Keil, "Elephant–Human *Dandi*".

enforcing the preservation of wild elephant populations, as often claimed in official (post)colonial discourses, they have authorized further encroachments on elephant pathways and livelihoods. Because these upheavals have unfolded within deeply asymmetrical socio-economic contexts — as in Sri Lanka, Assam, and several south Indian states — the impacts of elephants in terms of crop raiding, property damage, violent (including deadly) attacks, and associated mental health consequences have been unequally distributed. Poor communities bear the brunt of elephant nuisances, and human–elephant conflict "aggravates pre-existing social and institutional inequality", while also highlighting the unevenly shared social costs of broader environmental upheavals, including settlement on elephant paths.[43]

Thus, alongside increasing human encroachment into elephant ranges, territorialization practices that disrupt human–elephant historical geographies have played a significant — albeit often overlooked — role in the production of human-elephant "conflict". Moreover, as several contributions to this issue demonstrate, conservation-oriented territorialization relies on techno-scientific devices and practices — such as radio- and GPS-collar tracking, de-tusking (to prevent fence breaking), capture, relocation, taming, and slaughter — that reproduce harm under the banner of care.[44] In today's Western Ghats, wild elephants live in fragmented forest patches and regularly encounter humans in plantations and villages. Elephants tagged as problematic are captured, broken, and trained in elephant work camps as part of conservation programmes — a legacy of colonial practices that themselves relied on ancient traditions of using elephants for work (Frank and Suma). How to understand such a long legacy of elephant labour, while recognizing their own experiences of this very specific relationship with humans? For this, we need to also account for the role of the mahouts.

43 Barua, "Bio-geo-graphy", 924–26; Jadhav and Barua "The Elephant Vanishes", 1357; Keil, "Elephant–Human *Dandi*"; Lorimer, "Elephants as Companion Species"; Thekaekara and Thornton, "Ethnic Diversity", 307.

44 Srinivasaiah and Sinha, "Outliers", 70; Evans and Njeri Nduguta, "Implications". See also Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 164–92.

Mahouts and "Companion" Elephants

Reflecting globalized patterns, conservation of both Asian and African elephants itself relies on the exercise of mahout-mediated biopower, especially in the now dominant fragmented areas and captive environments. In the Western Ghats, this process has intensified since 2014, when authorities decided to use trained elephants, or *kumkis*, to capture other elephants tagged as problematic (Frank and Suma, this issue). Saha highlights the "white European account's tendency to romanticize the relationship between the *oozie* (the Burmese word for elephant driver) and an elephant," an inclination imbued with colonial racial hierarchies and Orientalist tropes.[45] Although stripped of these colonial trappings, discourses on elephant–mahout intimacy did not vanish with the end of the colonial era and imprint academic work that focuses on animal agency within labour contexts. Social science research on elephant–mahout relationships — and, more broadly, on elephant–keeper relations, including in zoos — has drawn extensively on theories of animal labour that conceptualize interspecies work as collaborative and frame labour relations as hybrid communities "where people and elephants intimately co-shape each other's lives."[46] This scholarship has emphasized human affection, care, respect, and consideration for elephants; human-elephant shared affect, intimacy, concern, bonding, trust, cooperation, and partnership; as well as elephants' autonomy, initiative, volition and capacity "to withdraw [their] cooperation."[47] While these perspectives illuminate important dimensions of productive animal labour, they can also obscure the power structures within which such relationships unfold.[48]

In response to critiques foregrounding human violence towards elephants in the context of animal labour, several authors have opposed what they identify as "reductive and often Western

45 Saha, *Colonizing Animals*, 110–8.

46 For example, Keil, "Musth as a biosocial event", 234–37, 240–42; Lainé, "Conduct and Collaboration". See also Despret, "Do Animals Work?".

47 Locke, "Introduction", 17; Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, "Nāgādhyakshaçaritha", 202–3; Lainé, "Conduct and Collaboration".

48 See for instance: Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, "Nāgādhyakshaçaritha", 202–3.

conceptions that elephant keeping is ethically wrong."[49] Yet, as this special issue demonstrates, concern for animal ethics and attention to elephants' lived experiences and suffering are not the exclusive purview of Western actors. Moreover, mahoutship did not historically develop in a socio-political vacuum. As Trautmann argues, there were probably no mahouts before kingships,[50] and the capture of elephants—and with it the expansion of mahoutship—was significantly intensified under British colonial rule to sustain (post) colonial export-oriented economies. Rather than structuring the analysis along a mahout/Asian versus non-mahout/Western binary, it is therefore more productive to situate the emergence and evolution of mahoutship within complex social formations (that are often hierarchical), ones entangled in local to global commodity networks.[51]

This approach is reinforced by the difficulty of maintaining a clear distinction between Asian and Western uses of elephants, especially in a globalized world. In India, for example, the entanglement of the elephant-based timber industry, which itself fuels global economies, with the mass entertainment industry—an issue that warrants further study—is evidenced by the sale of "surplus" elephants deemed unfit for work to zoos.[52] Finally, as Susan Nance aptly observes, "in no way we diminish the agency of… elephants by understanding that… the power balance shifted decisively in favour of the humans in the equation."[53] Attention to human violence toward elephants does not preclude an interest in their cognitive abilities, adaptations, and forms of resistance. Rather, it enables a more precise understanding of the constraints imposed upon elephant agency, knowledge, temporalities, and cultures. This, in turn, sharpens our grasp of the evolving nature of elephant-keeper relations, including the documented rise in elephant violence towards mahouts.[54]

49 Lainé, Keil, and Rahmat, "Introduction," 23.

50 Trautmann, "Towards a Deep History of Mahouts", 52; *Elephants and Kings*.

51 Münster, "Challenges of Coexistence", 280–1.

52 Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, "Nāgādhyakshaçaritha", 201.

53 Nance, *Entertaining Elephants*, 95.

54 See Rahmat, "Time and the Elephant", 270, 272. See also Frank and Suma, this issue.

Frank and Suma's article helps to deconstruct mahout narratives by highlighting the intrinsic, structural violence of the taming process, which includes narrow and prolonged confinement, forced contact intended to break the animal, violent training, and chain- and fetter-mediated labour—all dynamics that render the many forms of elephant resistance largely ineffective. This does not mean that care and affection play no role in the mahout/*oozie*–elephant relationship. As Piers Locke argues, the handler-elephant relationship "involves trust and domination, cooperation and coercion, care and violence."[55] In fact, as many studies have shown, care is part of the submission process, while affection, trust, and attentiveness to the emotional states of elephants are all elements of efficient working relationships.[56] Yet, as rarely acknowledged in multispecies ethnographies, care and affection are part of domination and violence.[57] As Frank and Suma aptly argue, "care in fact means establishing human dominance over the animal and submitting it to human will and control."[58] Deconstructing the language of *care* within animal management—following scholars who critically interrogate such discourse rather than reproduce it—requires attending to the experiences of all human and non-human actors, and is essential for any multispecies ethnography that seeks to avoid becoming complicit in the very systems it examines.[59]

The same tension between discourses and practices of care, on the one hand, and the violence produced by captivity itself on the other, also permeates the entertainment industry, as powerfully demonstrated by Oliver Hochadel in his article on an elephant named Avi. Practices of care enable captors to keep elephants alive in socially and environmentally inadequate conditions. This is exemplified by the provision of a "makeshift canopy" to protect Avi from the sun and by the trimming of his front toenails (but not his hind ones, which

55 Locke, "Introduction", 16; Locke, "Animals, Persons, Gods".

56 Trautmann, "Towards a Deep History of Mahout"; Lainé, "Conduct and Collaboration".

57 Saha, *Colonizing Animals*, 67–68. See also the critique by Lorimer and Rahmat, "Elephants at Work."

58 See also Tuan, *The Making of Pets*, 69–114.

59 Lainé, *Living and Working with Giants*; Keil, "On the Trails"; Keil, *Presence of Elephants*.

became overgrown), since zoo confinement and hard flooring are unsuitable for elephants. Furthermore, care itself can produce slow violence, as shown by Avi's dental and skin problems caused by improper feeding, including public feeding with buns.

Building on Lynn M. Thomas's critical discussion of "agency as argument" and analytical endpoint, it is not enough to assert that marginalized actors face violence, nor to repeat the tautology that they possess agency.[60] Of course they do, albeit within coercive and unequal contexts. What is analytically meaningful for animal historians and multispecies ethnographers is to describe the specific forms that violence takes, how these forms are exercised, the effects they have on the animals concerned, the adaptations or resistances that follow—in other words, how agency is enacted under constraint. Equally important are the perceptions, responses, or silences of human actors who produce or tolerate these conditions. Detailed, fine-grained analyses of the production of violence, attentive to the lived experiences of both human and non-human beings, thus allow us to enrich our understanding of these power dynamics by showing how agency and material structures operate together, and by opening up avenues for the exploration of alternative human–animal relationships.

For instance, Saha shows that in colonial Myanmar, elephants' resistance to human violence provoked further human retaliation, producing cycles of escalating harm. This dynamic is vividly illustrated by the life of Ngwe Maung, a male elephant owned by the timber firm Steel Brothers in the 1930s, who, "[a]fter gaining a reputation for attacking his *oozies* […] was confined within a wooden stockade, burned with paraffin torches and starved in a three-day ordeal to 'tame' him." In seeming contrast, aggressive behaviours of zoo elephants, as in the case of Avi, were frequently downplayed or even concealed, sometimes recast as amusing or sensational anecdotes in the media to uphold the ideal of harmonious human-animal relationships that underpinned the modern zoo. Yet this concealment did not mitigate harm: unruly zoo elephants often ended

60 See Thomas, "Historicising Agency".

up being killed or handed over to circuses.[61] Whether openly confronted or silently constrained, elephant resistance was therefore consistently met with further human violence.

In their article, Frank and Suma examine human–elephant relationships with close attention to the ways human respond to animal resistance and distress. They highlight forms of trans-species communication through "peoples' feelings of deep sympathy and sorrow for [the elephants'] sufferings". Such perspective raises profoundly political research questions: How have local to international authorities responsible for elephant management responded to human distress provoked by pachyderm suffering? To what extent do structures of wildlife management, including conservationist programs, integrate such concerns into their strategies? Do they account for the full spectrum of human interests towards elephants, and by extension, how democratic are these programs in the contexts where they operate? In south India, Frank and Suma observe, neither animal nor human resistance to spiralling violence has significantly altered management practices rooted in the colonial era. Thus, if elephants and humans are indeed "becom[ing] together", and if both are "caught in complex entanglements" through which they "both express agency and shape the other in the course of their interactions",[62] this occurs within a highly constrained context and, as Saha — drawing on Giraud — argues, "entangled relations are often hierarchical."[63]

Knowing Elephants

Empirical knowledge about elephants, derived from interviews, oral histories, and participant observation, provides privileged insight into the dynamics of elephant-human interactions, as well as into elephant behaviours and their evolution under anthropogenic pressures. By comparing oral testimonies from Sudanese hunters about elephant communication with ethological research, Leonardi demonstrates the precision and value of such experiential knowledge. Similarly, Frank and Suma's focus on "practiced expertise" emphasizes

61 Nance, *Animal Modernity*; Pouillard, *Histoire des zoos*, 89; Szczygielska, "Animating Capture".

62 Lainé, Keil, and Rahmat, "Introduction," 15.

63 Giraud, *What Comes after Entanglement?*

that "scientists can learn a considerable amount about elephants from those who live with them on a daily basis."[64] Indeed, as Charles Darwin argued in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), humans can gain profound understanding of the behaviour and emotions of animals, particularly mammals, with whom they share daily life and frequent interactions.[65]

Communities interacting with elephants in Asia and Africa have long recognized them for their personhood, consciousness, and capacity for intraspecific knowledge transmission. The Nuer of southern Sudan and the Bende and Tongwe of present-day western Tanzania, have articulated ontological continuities between humans and elephants (Devos; Leonardi, this issue). Yet, elephants were subjected to hunting and appropriation in communities guided by animistic perspectives, characterized by mutual relatedness and engagement with members of other species, thereby identifying them as persons, and in societies shaped by naturalist ontologies, marked by the nature/society, animal/human divide.[66] In the Western Ghats, Malasar's perception of trained elephants as "members of the mahout's family" does not preclude their narrow confinement in kraals and other coercive practices.[67] Piers Locke has addressed these seemingly multiple ontological states and the contradictory practices they entail, showing how, in Nepal, the attribution of divine status to elephants coexists with their non-exclusive consideration as animals and as persons[68], and Bird-Davis argues that animistic perceptions allow individuals "to pursue individual interests within the confines of relatedness".[69] As Cherry Leonardi observes, while "Nuer hunting codes were based on beliefs in the common ancestry and spiritual connections between humans and elephants [...] in different ways, perhaps both European and African hunters sought to construct a noble foe that was similar to humans." Such overlaps help explain the

64 Münster, "Challenges of Coexistence", 275.

65 Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions*.

66 See Bird-David, "'Animism' revisited"; Thekaekara and Thornton, "Ethnic Diversity".

67 Vijayakrishnan and Sinha, "Nāgādhyakshaçaritha", 202–3.

68 Locke, "Animals, Persons, Gods", 171–6. See also Laura M. Rival's comment in Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited", 85.

69 Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited", 577.

transcultural character of colonial hunting: resistance or outright opposition to the appropriation and commodification of elephants was far from uniform among African and Asian communities.[70]

Indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial transcultural appropriations of elephants, combined with ongoing infringements on their paths and home ranges, have meant that empirical knowledge of these animals has been largely produced and transmitted by humans directly, and often violently, engaged with them: hunters and hunting associations (such as the *Bhujheghe* studied by Devos), farmers directly involved in human–elephant conflicts, mahouts, *oozie*s, and keepers, and, from the late nineteenth century onwards, conservation officials. Consequently, knowledge of wild elephants gathered through these sources tends to emphasize particular behaviours such as avoidance, aggressiveness, or flight (Leonardi, this issue). Knowledge of elephants in work camps, zoos, and circuses, by contrast, focuses on taming, care, and captivity-induced pathologies.[71] Finally, the regional and global trade in live elephants and their bodily parts often decontextualizes the animals, obscuring their provenance and erasing their life histories prior to transfer, exhibition, and use. This pattern repeats even for famous, individualized elephants; very little, for instance, is known about the life of the celebrity elephant Avi before his "zoo years" (1892–1914) (Hochadel, this issue). How, then, can we counter this distortion? And is it truly a distortion or, at least since colonial era, has the majority of human–elephant interactions been structured precisely by hunting, capture, and the decontextualization of these animals? Beyond critique, these questions invite us to consider how we might recover and learn from alternative human–elephant engagement—relationships that recognize elephants' agency, respect their movement along ancestral routes, and attend to the multispecies entanglements that have long shaped their lives.

Firstly, even in public discourses produced by those directly involved in the appropriation and management of elephants, knowledge

70 On the transcultural character of colonial hunting: MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature*; Sivasundaram, "Trading Knowledge"; Beinart and Hughes, *Environment and Empire*; Steinhart, *Black Poachers, White Hunters*.

71 Wemmer and Christen, *Elephants and Ethics*.

about these animals cannot be reduced solely to narratives of destruction, domination, or care, nor can all such accounts be dismissed as self-serving constructions. Leonardi demonstrates that elephants write their own histories, even within sources as ideologically charged as those produced by their killers. Similarly, Hochadel's analysis of media accounts about Avi, read both along and against the grain, reveals that such sources contain valuable "reality fragments." By mobilizing a wide range of materials, researchers can begin to separate the elephant's experiential "wheat" from the representational, self-indulgent "chaff", recovering traces of their agency, behaviour, and lived experiences.

Secondly, incorporating perspectives on elephants that go beyond the (predominantly male) gaze of elephants' owners and entrepreneurs, mahouts, *oozies*, keepers, hunters, traders, or officials can significantly enrich and complicate our understanding of pachyderms. Leonardi notes that Emin Pasha, writing in the 1880s, "provided far more descriptions of elephants peacefully grazing than did authors who hunted them." Given that hunting profoundly altered elephants' behaviours, cultures, populations, and geographic ranges, the following decades saw a marked decline in opportunities to witness peaceful pachyderms grazing in Central Africa. Recovering forgotten histories of elephant cultures and alternative forms of human–elephant engagement is therefore especially important for both researchers and people involved in elephant management. Moreover, alternative, pacified interactions continue to shape elephant–human relations. In contemporary south India, Frank and Suma highlight that some individuals "observe elephants out of curiosity and affection," and that systematically framing human–elephant encounters outside protected areas as "conflicts" is misleading, since it obscures the "diversity of relationships" through which elephants and people come into contact, which include respect, avoidance, and forms of conviviality. Such approaches reveal that human-elephant relations have always been more complex and variegated than narratives centred on domination, exploitation, or conflict suggest.[72]

72 See also Lorimer, "Elephants as Companion Species"; Mumby, "Widening the Lens", 323; Keil, "Elephant–Human *Dandi*", 265.

It is therefore essential to broaden the spectrum of actors considered in academic narratives, for instance by including Indigenous communities with long-standing, vivid traditions of cohabiting with elephants, small-scale and marginalized farmers, critics of elephant appropriation and treatment, such as environmental and animal-rights activists, and of course, the elephants themselves.[73] As shown by Anandi Gandhi, in eastern Thailand, "[m]arginalised farmers who have asymmetrical encounters with elephants […] continue to find ways to coexist in precarious conditions", thereby opening up ways to resist "global capital, conservation politics, and state control".[74] Elizabeth Oriel and Toni Frohoff highlight that small-scale farmers in Sri Lanka perceive conflicts with elephants as the consequence of unbridled, asymmetrical development policies, thereby opening avenues for multispecies justice and solidarity.[75] Hochadel's analysis of *El Diluvio* and other republican newspapers' coverage of Avi (this issue), demonstrates that animals are often integrated into social critique and that such critiques cannot be reduced to mere instrumentalization: they also convey sincere, evidence-based condemnations of animal suffering and poor conditions. Perspectives of this kind hold epistemic potential, allowing researchers to incorporate knowledge that is "experienced silently, … latent and undiscovered", as well as "affective, dominantly vernacular ethologies".[76] In doing so, they enrich political ecology narratives that link social and environmental issues, complicating them by integrating animal concerns, especially in regions particularly affected by the difficulties and risks of human–elephant cohabitation, compounded by gendered and social inequalities.[77]

Of course, sources produced by social critics demand the same careful historical scrutiny as those produced by practitioners (and the categories of critics and practitioners sometimes overlap).

73 See also Thekaekara and Thornton, "Ethnic Diversity", 308–10.

74 See for instance: Gandhi, "Elephant–Farmer Coexistence", 284, 290–93.

75 Oriel and Frohoff, "Affective Ecologies", 56.

76 Banerjee and Sinha, "Political and Affective Ecologies", 38; Oriel and Frohoff, "Affective Ecologies", 55–56.

77 Banerjee and Sinha, "Political and Affective Ecologies", 35–39.

Nonetheless, including as many human and more-than-human actors as possible helps deconstruct dominant discourses and develop more nuanced perspectives on human–elephant relationships, beyond reductionist framings such as that of "conflicts" (Frank and Suma) or "passive spectatorship" (Hochadel), thereby reopening alternative possibilities for human–elephant coexistence.

Writing Elephants

The contributions gathered in this special issue demonstrate how scholars can successfully reinsert elephants as active subjects within academic narratives, allowing for a deeper understanding of human–elephant relationships, beyond self-serving or anthropocentric discourses. As Leonardi shows, even within sources produced by hegemonic actors — in this case, hunters in nineteenth-century southern Sudan — the elephant can "speak",[78] revealing traces of their experience and agency. To make elephants speak — that is, to better apprehend their lives and interpret historical sources — our contributors employ a range of methodologies. For example, Hochadel draws on photographs, which reveal much about the physical condition of captive animals; zoo architectural remains, which have often been explored for their cultural dimensions,[79] while archaeology of the zoo holds promise for animal histories; and physical remains of elephant bodies analysed through applied zooarchaeology. Building on recent edited volumes, this special issue further demonstrates that a multidisciplinary approach is essential for studying elephant histories.[80]

All authors mobilize ethological research to better interpret historical and other sources and to assess the plausibility of stories about elephants. Of course, using contemporary ethological knowledge to analyse historical sources presents methodological challenges that scholars have been quick to point out.[81] Interestingly, both

78 Skabelund, "Can the Subaltern Bark?"

79 Guillery, *Buildings of London Zoo.*

80 Lainé et al., *Composing Worlds with Elephants*; Locke and Buckingham, *Conflict, Negotiation, and Coexistence.*

81 Baratay, *Animal Biographies.*

social scientists and life scientists are well aware of historical evolutions in elephant behaviour. As pointed out by Leonardi, researchers from the Amboseli Elephant Research Project "would emphasize [that] elephants are individual and cultural beings, whose behaviours are bound to vary across time, place and context." Elephant ethologists in south India, where anthropogenic changes have profoundly affected elephant behaviours and societies, have studied strategic adaptations of individual elephants and collective, i.e. cultural, evolutions that occur regularly over the span of a lifetime.[82] All contributions in this special issue demonstrate that hunting, capture, taming, and human–induced environmental changes have shaped the behaviours, emotions and experiences of individual elephants. Thus, recognizing elephants as historical actors opens up promising avenues for dialogue between the humanities and life sciences, illuminating both the opportunities and challenges of multi- and interdisciplinarity.

Another, related way to integrate elephants more fully into academic inquiry is through the development of animal biographies. This narrative method is attentive to their lived experiences—that is, beyond moments when animals stand in the limelight or engage in dynamic human–animal interactions—and, where possible, spanning their entire lifetime.[83] Such a perspective both encourages and deepens the growing interest in individual elephants, including within natural science research, which typically seeks "generalisable patterns"[84]. The five elephant biographies in this issue—those of Avi (ca. 1873–1914), Ziggy (1917–1975), Arikomban, Kalloor Komban, and Soorya—continue what Sandra Swart calls "animal-sensitive histories".[85] Each biography sheds light on unique, idiosyncratic trajectories of these individual elephants. Frank and Suma, for instance, show how elephant personalities and behaviours toward humans—from quietness to aggression— are shaped in part by prior experiences and individual life paths. In so doing, they trace

82 Srinivasaiah and Sinha, "The outliers".

83 Pouillard, "Animal Biographies".

84 Thekaekara, "Bridging Epistemological Boundaries", 300.

85 Swart, *Lion's Historian*.

the origins and development of human–elephant conflicts, and "unpac[k] what the generic term 'conflict' means", revealing the complex interplay of individual histories, socio-environmental contexts, and human interventions.

Indeed, elephant biographies also reveal broader social transformations. Hochadel's study of Avi, read alongside other zoo elephant biographies,[86] demonstrates that, from the late nineteenth century onwards, the management of captive elephants was shaped by the decontextualization of commodified animals and by transnational networks of ideas and practices aimed at keeping pachyderms alive, while maximizing their economic and cultural value. Thus, despite their individual particularities, zoo-animal biographies collectively reveal the emergence of a globalized zoo.[87] Within this global zoo, making elephants accessible to the public — including through direct physical contact and public feeding — became central to the zoo's rhetoric of harmonious human–animal relationships, and to the entertainment value of zoo animals. Such practices had profound effects on elephants' experiences and behaviours, inducing, for example, persistent begging behaviours (Hochadel).[88]

Frank and Suma note that trauma runs through all three biographies of Western Ghats elephants they recount. They link this to the fact that most wild elephants in south India — as is also the case in Sri Lanka[89] — venture, or are forced to venture, outside nature reserves and forest patches, where traumatic encounters with humans are frequent. These dynamics feed into histories of animal violence, as traumatized elephants are more likely to engage in aggressive, even "chase-and-kill," behaviours toward humans. Similarly, Leonardi argues that elephant aggression towards hunters was largely produced by human–induced attacks, highlighting the potential for a historical approach focused on the production of violence and the dynamics of human–animal conflicts. This is all the more important given

86 Nance, *Animal Modernity*; Szczygielska "Animating Capture".

87 Hochadel, "Science at the Zoo".

88 See also: Rothfels, "Touching Animals". On begging behaviour in zoos, see Hosey et al., *Zoo Animals*, 478–79.

89 Oriel and Frohoff, "Affective Ecologies", 53.

that human-elephant encounters claim numerous lives each year, including approximately four hundred people and one hundred elephants annually in India, and provoke significant deleterious psycho-social consequences.[90]

Animal biographies can also illuminate regional historical dynamics, helping us to better understand the history of elephants as individuals, communities, populations, and species in context. As Frank and Suma argue, this method allows us "to gain insights into how [elephants] have changed [. . .] over time in response to rapid environmental change" and human–induced pressures. Such perspectives make it possible to trace both the destruction of elephant cultures and the emergence of new ones; including violent social cultures, human-oriented aggressive cultures, and addictive food cultures, transmitted through individual animals.[91]

Despite the impossibility of disentangling the history of elephants as individuals, populations, and species, conservation programs tend to focus only on the latter categories. This narrow taxonomic focus enables violent practices towards individual elephants to persist under the guise of preserving populations or species, without recognizing that what is actually being preserved are new animal cultures shaped by human control and violence.[92] Frank and Suma illustrate this in the Western Ghats, where forest authorities manage elephant–human conflict by generating further tensions — both between humans and elephants, and between elephants themselves. They do that through the brutal removal of "problem" elephants, their taming, and the creation of *kumkis* (elephants trained to enforce human control on wild elephants, by capturing "problematic" individuals in forced-choice situations of reward or punishment). This violent avatar of conservation — reflecting the broader coercive logics of elephant-management practices — produces further aggressive encounters, both between elephants and between

90 Menon, "Foreword", 8; Jadhav and Barua "The Elephant Vanishes".

91 See also Barua, "Bio-geo-graphy"; Münster, "Challenges of Coexistence" and, on the role of animal biographies in studying animal cultures, Baratay, *Animal Biographies*.

92 Pouillard, *Histoire des zoos.*

elephants and humans. These include the breakdown of social bonds following relocation and so-called "accidents" in which traumatized elephants kill humans.[93] Together with the authors, we argue for a new paradigm in wildlife management, one that is attentive to the lived experiences of individual animals and informed by animal biographies.[94]

Human–Elephant Coexistence

Elephants are far from passive objects of knowledge and management, a fact that demands analytical approaches attentive to their agency, relationality, and ecological presence. Alongside humans and myriad non-human beings, elephants actively co-create landscapes and social relations. In nineteenth-century southern Sudan, their movements and foraging activities opened up routes through the bush, destroyed human–built roads, created open grazing land and savannah, and formed waterholes—thereby both facilitating and complicating human activities and cattle management (Leonardi, this issue). Devos shows how elephants in Tanganyika shaped human spaces by creating networks of pathways, particularly in regions where colonial road construction began in the late 1950s.

Amid these dynamics of co-creation and co-evolution, human-driven transformations—ranging from habitat loss to hunting and capture—have compelled elephants to continually adjust. As Devos demonstrates for the area of Malangwa in the 1980s, African elephants created new paths to circumvent human obstructions to their routes or to avoid humans, whom they had learned to recognize as a source of danger.[95] Frank and Suma show that elephants living in fragmented habitats and forest patches surrounded by human settlements in the Western Ghats have adapted their diets to available food sources, including agricultural crops and human food, thereby generating new forms of conflicts. Nishant M. Srinivasaiah and Anindya Sinha observe that, in the Eastern Ghats, habitat destruction "has been so severe that, in some cases, elephant herds

93 See also, for similar dynamics in Sri Lanka: Oriel and Frohoff, "Affective Ecologies", 54–56.

94 See also: Münster, "Challenges of Coexistence".

95 See also: Keil, "Elephant–Human *Dandi*", 256–7.

have now been entirely displaced from their natal ranges."[96] Elephants have responded in multiple ways: by forming all-male groups, that increase their chances of survival in high-risk anthropogenic environments, as well as shifting night-day activity patterns to avoid humans, and restructuring their social organization. Strikingly, many of these adaptations occur within the lifespan of individual elephants.[97] While the myriad adaptations elephants have developed to cohabit with humans have received little attention and recognition in studies on human–elephant conflict, they demonstrate that humans are not the only actors invested in peaceful coexistence.

That said, many adaptations have, often inadvertently, further complicated elephant–human interactions and strained relations among human communities differently affected by elephants. Devos, for example, describes conservation-driven evictions aimed at "restoring animal migratory corridors between Katavi and Mahele," a process that not only reveals how these elephant pathways were erased in the first place, but also exposes deep social inequalities and enduring power asymmetries in former colonial states. Such cases underscore the importance of historicizing conservation conflicts and attending to historical transformations of elephant routes and patterns of human and animal land use, along with the resulting reshaping of human and animal historical geographies. They also highlight the broader, multi-scalar historical processes in which these dynamics are embedded, including colonialism, global mass consumption, industrialization and urbanization. As Shubhra Nayar and Paul G. Keil observe in their work on the Nilgiris hills of India, "the personal, political and consumer choices that people […] currently make in their daily lives can have detrimental environmental [and animal] effects in other countries." Consequently, they argue, "[t]he problems of 'conflict' cannot be solely located at the margins of society, […] at the embodied juncture of rural farmer and elephant. There are broader social forces that have structured and continue to make coexistence with elephants in these spaces difficult."[98]

96 Münster, "Challenges of Coexistence", 289; Srinivasaiah and Sinha, "Outliers", 70.

97 Srinivasaiah and Sinha, "Outliers".

98 Nayar and Keil, "Lantana Elephants", 108–109.

Long-term, historically informed studies allow us to better understand—and care for—the associated environmental and animal injustices, taking into account both "the needs of marginalized human populations" and "the liberation of unfree animals they live alongside" (Saha, this issue).

Overall, long-term, multi-scalar, and more-than-human histories that take socio-environmental and animal (in)justice seriously and are attentive to "non-European modes of speaking for the elephant"[99] (Devos, this issue), are crucial for understanding wildlife conflicts and fostering coexistence. In the time we still want to call the Anthropocene, such coexistence entails "mutual accommodations and compromises" between humans and elephants, alongside considerations of social justice, as Saha argues. It requires participation-based, locally rooted, creative, and holistic strategies[100] that move beyond "the oppositional binaries of humans versus elephants",[101] and elephant territories versus human spaces.[102]

Conclusion

This special issue demonstrates that understanding human-elephant relationships requires moving beyond reductionist narratives of conflict, domination, or care, and attending instead to the lived experiences, agency, and histories of elephants as individuals, populations, and species. Through innovative methodologies—ranging from animal biographies, and oral histories, to zooarchaeology, visual analysis, and archival media—contributors reveal how elephants shape, and are shaped by, human social, political, and environmental contexts.[103] From the opening of bush pathways in nineteenth-century Sudan to the creation of new foraging strategies in the Western Ghats, elephants co-create landscapes, social ecologies, and even conservation practices, while enduring persistent forms of violence, trauma,

99 Jepson et al., "Intradisciplinary Bio-geography", 172; Barua, "Bio-geo-graphy".

100 Münster, "Challenges of Coexistence", 280–2, 293–4.

101 Gandhi, "Elephant–Farmer Coexistence", 283; Thekaekara and Thornton, "Ethnic Diversity".

102 Barua, "Bio-geo-graphy"; Keil, "Elephant–Human *Dandi*".

103 See Thomas, "Towards a Zooarchaeology".

and decontextualization. By foregrounding more-than-human perspectives, examining the production of violence, and recovering alternative human–elephant relationships, the articles in this collection illuminate the complex, entangled, and transcultural histories of these remarkable animals. Ultimately, they call for approaches to wildlife management, conservation, and historical scholarship that recognize the individuality, sociality, and cultural life of elephants, opening possibilities for more just and attentive forms of coexistence.

It is therefore fitting that this special issue closes its introduction by returning to the elephant that greets readers on the cover: Rembrandt's 1637 drawing of Hansken (1630–1655), now recognized as the new type specimen for the Asian elephant. Her story is a reminder that the routes of elephants — biographical, historical, and affective — rarely follow straight lines. For more than two centuries, zoological knowledge of *Elephas maximus* rested on a preserved foetus in ethanol, long assumed to be Asian. Only in 2013 did ancient DNA analysis reveal this earlier type specimen to be an African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), prompting researchers to retrace the tangled pathways of classification.[104] Their search led them across archives, museums, and centuries of human-elephant encounters, eventually identifying an elephant skeleton in Florence that had been described by naturalist John Ray in 1693 and later cited by Linnaeus in 1758. Genetic testing confirmed what Rembrandt's attentive sketch had already captured: this was Hansken, a travelling performer whose life intersected with Dutch rule in Sri Lanka, colonial global trade, emerging natural history, circus training, and baroque art. Rembrandt saw her in Amsterdam in 1637 when she was touring the Netherlands and made four sketches of her in chalk. Hansken's posthumous journey, from a seventeenth-century spectacle to a twenty-first-century genetic revelation, encapsulates the multi-layered routes explored in this issue. Her story reminds us that elephants are not merely objects of study but co-participants in the making of knowledge, drawing humans into relationships that span disciplines, institutions, and continents. As the contributions to this

104 Cappellini et al., "Resolution of the Type Material".

special issue show, integrating elephants into more-than-human narratives requires attention not only to their movements across landscapes, but also to their movements through archives, taxonomies, imaginations, and lived histories. In following these routes we are invited to rethink what it means to encounter elephants as world-makers. Hansken's presence on our cover thus signals both a point of departure and a return: a reminder that every elephant we study carries traces of many stories, and that our task is to learn how to follow them with care.

The elephant's path is rarely straight, or straightforward. It meanders through forests, fields, and riverbeds, but also through our stories, our knowledges, and our imaginations. To follow these routes is to acknowledge that elephants have always been co-authors in the landscapes and histories we share. To read the past with elephants is to inhabit a scale of history measured not only in documents but in footsteps, memories, and migrations. Their routes cut across human timelines, demanding stories capacious enough to hold multispecies entanglements. This special issue gathers work that follows elephants as historical actors and ethnographic partners, humbly reorienting how we write more-than-human worlds.

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