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Introduction

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Introduction

More-than-elephants

Despite several millennia of scientific, cultural, and historical fascination, in recent decades much of the general narrative regarding elephants has been driven by the research questions, methods, and concerns of biologists and conservationists based in Africa (Douglas-Hamilton & Douglas-Hamilton, 1975; Moss, 2000; Safina, 2015). Their surprising discoveries, however, have always run parallel, or tempted interpretation, from other perspectives and regions. Widespread reports of the elephant's unmistakable intelligence, rich social lives, and remarkable personhood, well-known across different cultures that share any intimacy with the species, are explored through a diverse range of perennial questions. Their long-entangled history with humans as working animals or simply living near humans in skillful exploitation of shared environments has prompted the social sciences to explore interspecies relations that challenge binary, often Western, constructs such as the long-held notions of "domestic" or "wild" (Lainé, 2020; Cassidy & Mullin, 2007). Even within imaginaries, these strange and charismatic beings have attracted the gaze of artists for more than a millennia across cultures (Parkington & Prada-Semper, 2021), sometimes stretching, when we think of Durer's elephant sketches, to places where elephants have never freely roamed.

Composing worlds with elephants gathers together some of these alternative research approaches. This edited volume expands on presentations, and the lively dialogue they sparked, at an online conference held in 2020. The project was born from a simple desire to reconnect during the isolating and deeply uncertain time of the global SARS-COV-2 pandemic. The remarkable enthusiasm we witnessed suggests that our efforts were timely. We—and all the participants—recognised a latent willingness among scholars to reassess the state of human-elephant knowledge or, at the very least, to explore the body of ideas circulating within this complex subject. We also observed that while the conference attendees ranged from fields spanning the humanities to the biological sciences, questions often bridged one another. Each scholar reflected a great generosity in rethinking their ideas and understanding of elephant identity, agency, and human coexistence. There was a palpable hunger and curiosity to look for clues beyond their respective fluencies.

The chapters within this volume reflect that spirit of disciplinary versatility. They offer the reader a diverse set of topics and questions that are distinguished from the dominant biological, ecological, and conservation approaches to elephant studies. Instead, the reader will

find a fluid range of elephant-linked concerns across diverse strands of knowledge, shaping ideas from seasoned and emerging scholarly voices. A randomised exploration through just a few of the chapters will take the reader, for example, through an intricate linguistic history of a mahout language (Lim, chapter 7), offer brief glimpses into elephant wisdom in their more-than-human botanical knowledge (Lainé, chapter 9), explore conceptual redefinitions of the animal subject itself through time (Rahmat, chapter 13), and even a gendered analysis of human elephant conflict (Banerjee & Sinha, chapter 1).

Despite this eclecticism, however, we cannot claim that this volume offers an exhaustive representation of current research. We recognise that *Composing Worlds with Elephants* does not directly engage with the exciting, equally multidisciplinary work being done in Africa (Moss et al., 2011), nor does it give voice to the elephant diaspora across zoos and sanctuaries in non-elephant ranging states. Our pool of contributors grew quite organically, much like the event that catalysed this project, often from our own curiosities; and as an editorial team of two anthropologists and an animal geographer, this may partly explain the gravitation towards qualitative, cultural, and local contexts. Nevertheless, we underline that these very perspectives, and their often-intersectional nature, are frequently overlooked, much needed, and latent with opportunities for cross-fertilisation.

Composing worlds beyond “ologies”

“Composing Worlds” has been the consistent theme that captures how our subjects of study are framed. Anthropologist Philippe Descola (2014) coined the term *worlding* from an anthropology of nature, referring to how beings build their distinctive worlds to constitute a collective. The term captures how we frame our subjects of study. “Worlds” can only be understood in the plural; that is, there can be no homogenous world or way of representing a subject. There will always be cultural, biological, human and nonhuman perspectives on the environment. The lives of beings must be interpreted within the specificities of the historical, political, and ecological context in which they thrive (van Dooren, 2019). Worlds are always shared, composed with, and emergent; they are entangled in a multispecies dialogue with human and elephant bodies and practices but also co-constituted by a broader ecology of organisms, materials, and forces. Worlds are always the result of an unfolding dialogue between multiple perspectives and beings, visible or otherwise. Our mutual positions emerge with, though, and always in relation to, others. Humans and elephants, caught in complex entanglements, both express agency and shape the other in the course of their interactions.

In this spirit, the chapters in this volume reflect many different worlds, be it the disciplinary worlds scholars are trained from, the more-than human world of elephants the authors are inclined to capture, or the multi-faceted inter-worlding that occurs between humans and elephants. The integration of this volume humbly

represents a collection of these attempts at composing worlds. It testifies to why intersections and overlaps are important when tackling the protean nature of the elephant. As beings that change rapidly, often in precarious environments, the dominance of one epistemological approach is always at risk of producing stale lines of questioning and analyses, ever risking a reduction of its complexity. These chapters' attempts to expand disciplinary boundaries can lead to cross-pollination, or the propagation of more questions and solutions that often require collaboration among scholars with diverse sets of expertise. We anticipate and invite readers to seek these opportunities themselves and discover (as the experience has been for us) unexpected and surprisingly new connections and alluring hypotheses.

The present volume follows a tradition of other notable elephant research anthologies that have attempted to put forward or include multiple disciplines. First came Wemmer and Christenson's (2008) *Elephants and Ethics*, which explored the subject of ethics in elephant welfare and coexistence in both Asian and African species and included contributions from scholars from a range of disciplines, including veterinarians, biologists, naturalists, and those from the humanities. Locke & Buckingham's *Conflict, Negotiation and Coexistence* (2016) soon followed. Focused predominantly on Asia, this volume included contributions from historians, anthropologists and social scientists, as well as biologists writing from a historical perspective. Finally, the recently published *The Elephant Reader*, edited by Ed Emery (2021), offers an eclectic mix of papers touching on, among many other things, elephants in Afghani history, illegal trade and wildlife crime, elephant ecology, and ancient India. *Composing worlds with elephants* builds upon its predecessors by further creating spaces that support diversity, engagement, and novel perspectives in elephant research.

What perhaps distinguishes the collection of chapters in *Composing worlds with elephants* is that despite each author's respective disciplinary identity—whether it be geographer, conservationist, human-animal researcher, biologist, or historian—a remarkable few have chosen to stay in their lane and stick within the epistemological tradition that trained them. For instance, there are biologists who draw on humanities-inspired analysis and subject narration to analyse wild elephants (Srinivasaiah and Sinha, chapter 3), a geographer speculating on conservation through a futurist history (Shell, chapter 8), and a behavioural ecologist drawing on anthropological considerations (Mumby, chapter 16). Many chapters cite literature from across the biological and social sciences, pointing to the unexpected ways different fields may inform one another. Some seek to reframe biological analysis through an interspecies and interdisciplinary “biosocial” framework (Keil, chapter 12). All the authors in this volume write with an awareness of their respective discipline's limits, while reaching beyond them. In this respect, the volume pushes the boundaries of

how we think about elephants and human-elephant relationships and ultimately, how we practice scholarship and interdisciplinarity.

The boundary-crossing chapters are the latest expressions of a long running interest, at least within the last ten to fifteen years, to find multidisciplinary solutions and alternative perspectives. This “turn” may be attributed to several factors. It is increasingly acknowledged that managing human-wildlife conflict requires attending to the “human dimension”. This runs alongside the rising popularity of the notion of “co-existence”, a term that asks researchers to rethink conflict by imagining people and wildlife inhabiting shared, rather than separate, landscapes (Pooley et al., 2021). There is also the “more-than-human” turn within the humanities, which has attempted to reconceptualise the subjecthood of nonhuman beings and their cultural, historical, and ecological connections with people and environments (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). The potential for these perspectives to produce new knowledge about elephants and elephant worlds presciently anticipated by Locke (2013), who, similarly influenced by multispecies research, saw the need for interdisciplinarity in elephant research and “...chart[ed]... the emergence of an interdisciplinary research program and discursive space for human-elephant intersections...”, what he coined “*ethnoelephantology*”. Whether this growing interaction between different disciplines in elephant studies will eventually coalesce under a single rubric is unclear. However, these shifts in elephant studies have increasingly demanded more diverse methods to understand these animals and the messy complexity of their living with humans. The more-than-human or multispecies turn holds a strong influence across many chapters within this volume (Gandhi, chapter 14, Rahmat, chapter 13, and Lainé, chapter 9, to name a few) and serves as proof of this approach bearing fruit.

Themes and contents of the book

Wild relations, wild individuals, wild affects

While the term “wild” suggests free-ranging elephants that live beyond the human, the authors in this segment explore elephant individuals and communities whose lives are deeply entangled with human practices and worlds. Instead of a whole species or population-level focus, authors examine long-term observations of specific, named elephants, studying their relationship with humans. This focus extends from an analysis of “problem elephants” in Africa that have a particular talent for overcoming fences, contributed by Lauren Evans and Redempta Nduguta (chapter 4), to equally-skilled male elephants in India that respond quickly to modern ecological changes, developing surprising new behaviours and modes of inhabiting the landscape, as illustrated by Nishant Srinivasaiah and Anindya Sinha (chapter 3). Other perspectives look closer at the human dimension, though never losing sight of the elephant—by exploring the complex ways that the two species intersect through the shared space of “affect”. Two chapters, in particular, unpack the ways in which it has

shaped human-elephant relations. Elisabeth Oriel and Tony Frohoff (chapter 2) envision affect at multidimensional levels, threading throughout and knotting together human-elephant environmental entanglements, while Banerjee and Sinha (chapter 1) ask us to consider the oft-overlooked affective aspects of gender and how they might define elephant interactions and agency. When read together, these chapters collectively enrich our understanding of these power-laden, complex, multi-faceted, and unfolding interspecies “contact zones” (Haraway, 2008).

Their complementarity also inspires cross-cutting questions, both grounded and speculative, explicit and implicit in the respective texts. How are individual elephants perceived and constructed differently depending on how genders intersect with them? Can we speak about the construction of gender within elephant society? How have fences shaped the affective presence of individual elephants like Rocky in Sri Lanka, or how have interactions with human infrastructures in general made elephants more visible, interesting, and problematic in South Asia? While Evans and Nduguta’s questions and research about elephants must be made sense through Kenyan history, society, and ecology, their findings are deeply relevant to Asian elephant contexts (chapter 4). This generalisability extends to all the chapters in this section that raise key questions, develop insightful analysis, and offer generous concepts that can extend beyond the elephant and to other instances of human-wild life relations. The chapters on wild elephants in this book are examples of cutting-edge research on the growing subject of coexistence (Pooley et al., 2022).

Mahout-elephant relations from past to present

The next two parts deal with mahoutship in South and Southeast Asia and are entirely devoted to elephant-keeping cultures from past to present. The formal study of captive elephants in South and Southeast Asia has a much younger history than of their wild counterparts. Richard Lair, a renowned elephant expert and consultant for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), wrote the pioneering book on the subject (Lair, 1997), gathering an extensive survey of elephant populations in each of the thirteen Elephant Nations of South and Southeast Asia. Mahoutship began entering a state of crisis during this period, with mahouts and their elephant partners emerging out of forests to begin work in the tourism industry. Lair’s documentation of mahoutship and their shifting role in society broke with convention with emerging, often Western, criticisms of this human-elephant relationship. Lair sensitively considered the major role local knowledge played, and should play, for the future of the species. He invited scholars, in particular those from the humanities, to document elephant-keeping culture as vividly as possible before it faced the threat of disappearance. Following Richard Lair’s work on mahouts and elephants, the FAO regional office rapidly organised a second regional workshop which offered deeper insights and pragmatic needs (such as registration, economic

issues, or legal status) for better management of elephants living with their mahouts (Baker & Kashio, 2002).

The elephant holds natural importance for shaping the nation-states of the continent, and together with the strong bonds and unique relations it fosters with mahouts, the subject naturally involves and inspires both history and the broader humanities. One of the shared features of these two approaches is that each contributor tends to associate history and archaeology with other disciplines, such as biology, botany, and linguistics, and somehow makes it resonate with ethnographic insights and case studies from very obscure portions of history. By retracing them within global narratives linked to the history of humans and elephants, the chapters in this volume not only offer new or alternative interpretations of how the history of human-elephant relations has developed, but also enrich the body of knowledge as a whole.

We see this in Srikumar Menon and Anindya Sinha's chapter, which offers a truly original analysis of the representation of elephants between the 2nd and 3rd Centuries CE, where the old Buddhist stupa at Kanaganahalli in Karnataka (India) is unveiled to reveal a truly quotidian account of the relationship between humans and elephants (chapter 6). Another insightful dialogue between the past and present of mahouts and elephants' daily life and evolution is captured by the authors Sreedhar Vijayakrishnan and Anindya Sinha (chapter 10). Starting from a reading of the *Matanga Lila* (a famous Ancient elephant treatise), the mahout's perspective is presented in tandem with recent ethnographic observations that allow us to understand the evolution of mahoutship as a profession among the Malayali. This contrasts with the relationship between the Malasar and elephants in the adjacent Western Ghats, which appear dramatically different and reveal how the daily care and practices of mahouts from this community represent many forms of mutual respect. Finally, their comparative approach highlights how cultural environments and practices define contemporary elephant management and welfare and how individuality (both of mahouts and elephants) shape these relationships further. In continuation from his major works on the subject, historian Thomas Trautmann (chapter 5) provides an invitation to link history and contemporary ethnography to question the crucial role that local populations, referring specifically to the "forest people" of the Indian subcontinent, played in this venture, tracing how the lineage of mahoutship survived century after century.

The two themes of these parts, history and mahoutship, often bring together novel perspectives on the mahout-elephant partnership, adopting unexpected cross-disciplinary perspectives. Drawing from existing literature from the past and present, a linguistic analysis of mahout command languages provides a historical understanding of elephant handling across South and Southeast Asia. Teckwyn Lim (chapter 7) reinforces the hypothesis that there exists a common elephant culture diffused across South and Southeast Asia. On the other hand, when speculating on the future of elephant

conservation in light of the alarming rate of the global human population, Jacob Shell (chapter 8) draws a speculative “archive” from science fiction to seek implications on mahout futures.

The risk of mahoutship vanishing is probably greater now than at any time in the past. Jennifer Crawley’s contribution (chapter 11) points to an overall lack of knowledge and difficulty recruiting young mahouts in many parts of Asia. Her chapter insists on the necessity to engage more and document existing mahoutship. This necessity to fully consider mahouts’ knowledge and relationships with elephants works in tandem with Nicolas Lainé’s chapter, which highlights the mutual benefit of the shared life between mahouts and elephants in Laos, in terms of health and knowledge co-production (chapter 9). Their unique intimacy has even led to a system of medicine and care shared between the two species.

Overall, the chapters in this section show that for all of Asia and across the Ages, mahouts are at the forefront for witnessing what modern scientists or westerners may call elephant intelligence. Elephant knowledge manifests in practices such as self-medication or adaptation and consideration of new environments or the specific humans they deal with. For example, while focusing on *musth* among elephants in Assam, Paul Keil (chapter 12) develops a multispecies approach that shifts the focus from individual, behavioural phenomena to a biosocial event. Informed by ethnographic vignettes, the dialogues initiated with ecology, cultural practices and physiology show how *musth* disrupts the daily routines of elephants and their mahouts.

Thinking with elephants

Elephants push epistemic boundaries. The effortless growth from our call for papers in the volume’s last chapters is a testament to this phenomenon. Scholars gathered from fields as diverse as behavioural ecology, biology, geography, and anthropology, in varying career stages, reflect an honest dissatisfaction with either the limits of their discipline or, conversely, the limits of disciplinarity. Despite the nascency of each discipline’s foray into elephants, with scientific explorations of elephants only beginning in the mid-twentieth century, while animal geography and the broader environmental humanities beginning in the present century, the collection shows a latent hunger to improve upon, or borrow from, varying bodies of knowledge for a more holistic understanding of the elephant.

Part of the pleasure of being editors of such an eclectic volume has been considering the rich ways contributors may cross-fertilise with one another. For example, behavioural ecologist Hannah Mumby’s questions (chapter 16) regarding how to measure human influence in elephant studies parallel frustrations, and tempt new possibilities, from conservationist Tarsh Thekaekara’s reservations (chapter 15) that disciplinary confinements cause shortcomings in capturing elephant behaviour. Anthropologist Anandi Gandhi (chapter 14), on the other

hand, seeks material manifestations of blurred disciplinary boundaries through her fieldwork in Thailand. Finally, animal geographer Khatijah Rahmat (chapter 13) pushes these conceptual arguments further, questioning the epistemic foundations of how information is temporally organised. Overall, these diverse yet simultaneously convergent questions paint the exciting potentialities that elephant study continuously attracts, despite the chapters resting alongside what often feels like perennial questions regarding human-elephant coexistence and the far more longitudinal explorations of elephants in human history.

Artistic interludes

Readers will notice that the chapters are interlaced with works of elephant-inspired art. The decision to include artists and their crafts is part of the spirit of methodological eclecticism the volume hopes to capture. These images and essays also speak of the human and elephant relationship, offering novel perspectives on elephant worlds that provide spaces for inquiry beyond the confines of academia. Between formal academic chapters, there are reflections on the corporeal elephant's visual, auditory, and mythic manifestations. There is a detailed exploration of Carlos Casas' film Cemetery in an essay by Deborah Schrijvers (Artistic interlude 3). Philippe Coste reflects on his experience photographing mahouts and elephants in rural Laos, revealing sensuous, epidermal landscapes and shared interspecies intimacy between mahouts and elephants (Artistic interlude 2). Shubhra Nayar and Paul Keil unpack the Lantana Elephant Project, a migrating installation of over one hundred elephants made from the stems of the flowering plant *Lantana camara*, which asks viewers to reflect on human-elephant cohabitation, the loss of elephant habitat, and histories of colonialism (Artistic interlude 1). Each interlude offers beauty and reflection and invites readers to consider the myriad ways elephants, in their irreducible, creaturely charm, provoke questions, emotions, and craft equally.

future directions

It is our intention that *Composing worlds with elephants* resonates not only with academics but also with a larger audience of conservationists, NGO members, and the general public concerned about the current state of the environment. Though the chapters may not make explicit, prescriptive conclusions, they offer a sensitivity to approaches and insights for understanding subjects entangled in questions of elephant welfare and conservation. We know that the lives of elephants are increasingly at stake in the worlds where humans and elephants overlap, and that these overlapping relationships take on many forms. Though the focus has been on the local, relational level, these contexts will inevitably be impacted by greater forces, such as state-level decisions and global policies. Readers seeking conservation implications will find many aspects within "Wild Relations" that highlight how unique human-

elephant landscapes demand and deserve interventions that are sensitive to the historical and political factors that have shaped these contexts. Then there are the elephants themselves, who have been shown, throughout this volume, to possess remarkable individuality and responsiveness to countless forms of human interruption and intervention. Even for captive elephants, there is tremendous variation in cultural and interspecies practices reflecting an intimate understanding which defies less nuanced, reductive and often Western conceptions that elephant keeping is ethically wrong. Authors, and especially the elephants in this volume, have “spoken” against any single, universal solution.

Instead, the chapters in this volume share situated knowledges that demand an exploration of human and elephant lives beyond binaries and tired misconceptions. This, of course, also includes accounting for the precarious existence of Asian elephants and their capacity to thrive in their native environments; it involves acknowledging the fragile conditions in which mahout-elephant relations and elephant-keeping cultures across South and Southeast Asia presently endure. Awareness of these concerns cannot help but raise the question of how our research can positively impact the subjects we write about, especially politically. As humanities scholars, who must maintain a cautiousness against bias in our research, the active task is to find and foster diversity of interpretation and opinion, encourage sensitivity to differences, and discourage reductive solutions and simple labels of our ever-complex nonhuman neighbours. As sociologist Norbert Elias (1993) has made clear, there is a distinction between commitment and distancing. He argued that an involved research means wanting to act without necessarily adhering to a particular ideology. In our case, our modest act is to ensure the complexity and partnership in ideas is always valuable and never forgotten. This, we believe, does justice to the irreducible quality of the elephant and remains a powerful force in securing both the fascination for and the future of an animal we so revere.

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