

# Subalterns in the House: Sites for a Postcolonial Multispecies Ethnography<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Multispecies ethnography attempts to bring to the forefront those animal lives previously overlooked by charting our shared social worlds and showing how humans and nonhumans are mutually affected by social, cultural and political processes. The resistance in postcolonial critique to focus on nonhuman animal subjects stems from making the colonised and the animal comparable and the fear that such an association may dehumanise the human subject. This paper suggests that multispecies ethnography influenced by Latour, Haraway, Tsing and others is a useful tool for analysing postcolonial contexts because of its emphasis on relation, mutuality and alliances. However, I suggest that this inheritance is rebuilt as a *postcolonial* multispecies ethnography because of its attention to five aspects that is common to both fields: subaltern, local, collective, representation and decolonisation. By a careful reading of these key concepts with examples from contemporary literature, I show how postcolonial multispecies ethnographies engage with hybrid identities that are culturally produced and historically situated and how they register the nonhuman animals as narrativisable subjects who are nevertheless “irretrievably heterogeneous” (284). In this ethnographic emergence, postcolonial multispecies ethnography re-dignifies the nonhuman animal subject which opens up the radical possibility of realizing their embodied perspectives.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial. multispecies ethnography, subaltern, collective, representation, local, decolonization.

## Resumen

La etnografía multiespecie intenta poner en primera fila las vidas de aquellos animales que anteriormente se han ignorado trazando los mundos sociales compartidos y mostrando cómo humanos y no humanos se ven mutuamente afectados por los procesos sociales, culturales y políticos. La resistencia de la crítica poscolonial a la hora de fijarse en los sujetos animales no humanos surge de que la comparación del colonizado y el animal pueda deshumanizar al sujeto humano. Este ensayo sugiere que la etnografía multiespecie influida por Latour, Haraway, Tsing y otros es una herramienta útil para analizar los contextos poscoloniales debido a su énfasis en la relación, la mutualidad y las alianzas. Sin embargo, sugiero que este legado se reconstruye como una etnografía multiespecie *poscolonial* en base a su atención a cinco aspectos comunes a ambos campos: lo subalterno, lo local, lo colectivo, la representación y la descolonización. Por medio de una lectura detallada de estos conceptos clave con ejemplos de la literatura contemporánea, muestro como las etnografías multiespecie poscoloniales interactúan con las identidades híbridas

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producidas culturalmente y situadas históricamente, y cómo registran a los animales no humanos como sujetos narrativizables que son, no obstante, “irremediabilmente heterogéneos” (284). En este afloramiento etnográfico, la etnografía multispecie poscolonial re-dignifica al sujeto animal no-humano que se abre a la posibilidad radical de hacer realidad sus perspectivas encarnadas.

*Palabras clave:* Poscolonial, etnografía multispecie, subalterno, colectivo, representación, local, descolonización.

I remember the night my mother  
was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours  
of steady rain had driven him  
to crawl beneath a sack of rice. (130)

So begins one of modern India’s most famous poems by Nissim Ezekiel, taught regularly in schools and anthologised routinely in collections of modern Indian poetry. Among other things, school students take away from the poem the phenomenological rawness of the pain experienced by the mother and a real fear of what a scorpion’s sting might be like. Yet, Ezekiel’s poem is rarely taught as a poem about the scorpion even though the scorpion is the primary antagonist and the title of the poem is “The Night of the Scorpion” (1992). That is because the reader is expected to share in the poet’s vision about the subject of the poem: the villagers from a distant past with their superstitious beliefs. In such a reading, the scorpion is only trope and prop to the long-range connections that the poet builds between a modern Indian identity and its past. However, the scorpion does not die in the poem but “with every move that the scorpion made his poison moved”. Ezekiel acknowledges the corporeal non-human when he writes: “they searched for him: he was not found”. The site of the poem is multispecies—replete with nonhumans that bear witness to and speak to humans on the very issues that the student is made alert to.

In an analogous enquiry, I want to introduce questions for a postcolonial multispecies ethnography that is attentive to the world of the local and of the subaltern as one that is not only human. Multispecies ethnography foregrounds animal lives by focusing on how the lives of nonhuman organisms are mutually shaped by the political, social, cultural forces that shape humans (Kirksey and Helmreich 545). As Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich argue, we can begin to trace the nature of our entangled relationships in the asymmetrical and non-hierarchical alliances and connections that emerge (546). By pivoting narratives away from traditional ethnographic accounts which see animals merely as symbols and metaphors, multispecies ethnography relies on the material and processual relationships that bind together humans and nonhumans. In developing a decolonial praxis for multispecies ethnography, it is important to attempt to answer the simple provocation, what is *post* in the postcolonial? Or, how does that *post* alter and ground the nature of relationalities? This essay details some theoretical concerns common to the field of multispecies ethnography and postcolonial subalternity on the themes of speaking and representation. I analyse the meeting points and the divergences of postcolonial studies and multispecies ethnography through five sites. Each site has a conceptual history that features different ways that the animal subject is figured

in multispecies ethnography with strong resonances in postcolonial criticism: the subaltern, location, the collective, representation and decolonisation. Each aspect shapes how the multispecies ethnographer identifies the animal subject while attempting to instate them as proper subjects of “storied places” (van Dooren and Rose 1-24). In this essay, I only look at examples of multispecies ethnography conducted in India. But my hope is that some of the recurring strands running through the work of these scholars further demonstrate the postcolonial (hybrid) identities at play in their work.

Suvadip Sinha and Amit R. Bhaishya (2019) refer to the resonances between the two fields briefly in their well-received text on postcolonial animalities. They point out that multispecies ethnographers are interested in a wide range of “affective states” that focus on the relationship between human and animal and not prematurely invested only in relations of care (3). They also state boldly that multispecies ethnography has a decolonizing impulse by recognising that colonialism has thrived on the brutalisation of the lives of nonhumans. Further, multispecies ethnography is specifically attentive to the politics of place and space through its emphasis on the “storied experiences” that are constituted by multiple modalities of entanglement. Moreover, multispecies ethnography works to narrate the lives of actual animals (11).

In this regard, I want to highlight the emergence of multispecies ethnography in postcolonial contexts in contemporary academic writing. The celebratory mode of multispecies ethnography is replaced in postcolonial multispecies ethnography with notes of ambivalence, complexity, and tension. The relational thrust of multispecies ethnography, drawing on influential work by Haraway, Latour and Barad, has proven more amenable to talking about human-animal connections rather than critical animal studies or animal rights discourses for two reasons that are central to postcolonial critique. One, it allows for the nonhuman animal to be studied in a context of human politics, identities and aspirations, thereby networking the animal in a social world previously concerned with the human. Two, multispecies ethnography figures the nonhuman animal as an important actor of social worlds and not just as part of nature, thereby overcoming, to varying degrees of success, a postcolonial humanism which offers redemption only for humans. This adaptation also implies, in the reverse, that some of the trenchant criticism against multispecies ethnography that it is not politicised (Kopnina 2017) or that it is not ethical (Gillespie 2019) or that it is quietist (Weisberg 2009) will have to be reconsidered through a postcolonial lens. As we will see, these two preoccupations run as a single thread through my five questions arising in different forms and ways.

In the last part of the essay, I suggest that a postcolonial multispecies ethnography can re-dignify the nonhuman animal subject. In this contrapuntal reading of what is characteristically a human right and quality, dignity when charted ethnographically will not be bestowed upon an animal by a human subject (see Said). Instead, it will reveal itself and emerge ethnographically. The cultural difference that marks any postcolonial ethnography then when read into a multispecies society helps the ethnographer perceive nonhuman animals as socio-cultural subjects with interior and exterior landscapes of identity. In a multispecies re-coding of “Night of the Scorpion”, the house would not be a

felicitous space of deep reverie; it is one of stealth (the scorpion's) and agony (the mother's) as witnessed by other humans and non-humans. It becomes an auditorium that welcomes "more candles, more lanterns, / more insects, and the endless rain". This motley crew resists a modular reading of the poem as a Manichean psychodrama between human and animal. Instead, the house is a site for waiting with "the peace of understanding on each face".

## Subaltern

The resistance in postcolonial criticism to figure nonhuman animal subjects is derived from the established position of the colonised and the animal in a postcolonial society and the dangers in making them comparable. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015) identify four such anxieties: the shifting nature of the species boundary that must be fixed, the unassailable supremacy of the colonised over the subhuman or the nonhuman that must not be questioned, trolley experiment type scenarios where the human is pitted against the animal over limited resources, and the relative value of animals in different cultures and the valuing of human life over other forms of life (135-38). To think about the subaltern vis-à-vis the nonhuman animal is not to overturn these charges by establishing the precarity of animal condition as more acute or irenically, extend subalternity to animals as well. Rather, an examination of subalternity problematizes multiplicity as well as agency.

In his thrilling essay on mosquitoes in colonial Egypt, Timothy Mitchell (2002) works through some of these concerns. He argues that in the postcolonial history of the malarial epidemic in Egypt, a set of human actors had already been identified: "There are the British, manipulating Egyptian politics ...Americans; ...national elites... commercial landowners, entrepreneurs, and military officers; and, now and again, there are the subaltern communities—the rural population, the urban working classes, women—making up the rest of the social order. The mosquito, on the other hand, is said to belong to nature. It cannot speak" (42). The mosquito became a tool to guide state measures on public health such as on hygiene and disease where the malaria eradication campaign became a way for the post-colonial state to assert their scientific expertise and their mastery of it.

For the subaltern historiographer, this form of violent, inconspicuous exclusion is precisely the modality of the subaltern. The term "subaltern" originally referred to people who were unacknowledged and unseen in the structures of domination in terms of caste, gender, race, culture. It not only embodied the position of the marginalised but it also referred to the "centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history" (Prakash 1477). The subaltern cannot speak because the violence and the oppressiveness of the system that binds her also silences her even as she may continue to be exploited, tortured and injured (see Gramsci 1971; Guha 1995; Spivak 1988; Bhabha 1994). The subaltern is not easily assimilable because they are radically other so much so that it may be difficult to even "name" the subaltern (Spivak, "Postcoloniality and Value" 158). Nevertheless, as postcolonial studies has repeatedly shown, the subaltern is not a silent entity because

they occasionally enact practices with real consequences (such as the self-immolating Hindu widow).

Is the nonhuman subject that emerges in a multispecies ethnography a subaltern figure? Sundhya Walther engages with this possibility and asks if we could envision a subaltern solidarity if subalternity is indeed transspecies. Walther suggests that since subalternity is a zone of otherness the concept is amenable to non-anthropocentric analysis (10). This state of subalternity also leads one to ask if all animals are all subaltern and, if so, what exactly the *multi* means in multispecies ethnography (or multispecies justice, multispecies politics...). Does it refer to a form of multiplicity that is infinitely regressive? If it means something more than that—and it must be the case since the social field it aims to represent has the hierarchical and exclusionary power to silence the subaltern—then it is useful to pay closer attention to what multiplicity entails. Additionally, if human-animal social worlds are shared then there must be more interrelationships to be represented other than a solitary subaltern in a dyadic relation with another. Gyan Prakash argues that postcolonial critique does not zoom in on aporias and silences to celebrate polyphonic native voices or to privilege multiplicity. Instead, it shows how “the functioning of colonial power was heterogeneous with its founding oppositions. The “native” was at once an-*other* and entirely knowable; the Hindu widow was a silenced subaltern who was nonetheless sought as a sovereign subject asked to declare whether or not her immolation was voluntary. Clearly, colonial discourses operated as the structure of writing, with the structure of their enunciation remaining heterogeneous with the binary oppositions they instituted” (1488).

The subaltern historiographer resists the dominant narrative by keeping alive multiple narratives and histories of the subaltern pasts, thereby preserving heterogeneity as irreducible. On a similar note, Mitchell also concludes that to interrogate the presumed human agency that upholds a picture of universal reason that postcolonial states can then participate in does not mean introducing “limitless number of actors and networks” (43). He offers by way of a corrective that we take issue with conceptions of power and agency itself from which we extract notions of intentionality, autonomy, and expertise—crucial ingredients of human exceptionalism. In multispecies ethnography, the subaltern animal subject is narratively examined precisely in the ways it troubles neat divisions of nature and culture. Multispecies ethnography attempts to position the animal subject not as a perpetual subaltern but as subject to human sovereignty. At the same time, this human sovereignty depends on the animal’s otherness to exercise biopolitical control. Such control depends on the negotiation of animal agency and resistance which calls into question the unassailability of human sovereignty in the first place. The multiplicity in a multispecies narrative therefore aims not to recover a primordial animal subject but to show the interspecies relationships as pivoting on multiple histories that run counter to a popular history of capital or colonialism (see Tsing 2015).

A multispecies ethnography, like postcolonial critique, necessarily aims to narrate the hybrid agencies and encounters that involve human and nonhuman actors which go into the construction of a unitary human subject, in charge of their sovereign intention and unimpeded modernity. For example, Yamini Narayanan (2017) deploys Ananya Roy’s

theory of subaltern urbanism (2011) to theorise about a subaltern animism which recognizes the moral rights of nonhuman animals in India's urban spaces. She points out that urbanisation and informality have been typically analysed as human conditions and thinking about multi-species spaces as inclusive implies granting them the "right not to be criminalised" ("Subaltern Animism" 489). By politicising the street dog, she reframes the postcolonial city as a multispecies city that witnesses cross-species oppressions and violence, but also agency. The animal subaltern is entwined with human histories but a postcolonial multispecies ethnography illuminates the multiple histories and interagencies that implicate the animal and their exclusion.

## Location

The "local" as a trope continues to enjoy a pre-eminence in multispecies ethnography and postcolonial studies. To engage with how animals live with humans is to record how animals are central to particular social worlds (Kirksey and Helmreich 545). Similarly, Armstrong (2002) suggests that it is in the production of politically and culturally nuanced local histories that we can locate fruitful intersections between animal studies and postcolonial studies (416). Recent multispecies postcolonial anthropological intersections take a cross-sectional local history to show how animal lives are constructed within and along human histories while remaining attentive to how rituals and traditions as well as processes of modernity and modernisation shape the material lives of animals (Parreñas 2018; Govindarajan 2018; Kavesh 2020).

Beyond ethnography's focus on the local and particular, such multispecies ethnographic accounts have drawn on local instantiations of nature-cultural interactions to demonstrate this enmeshed sociality. The accounts, which are often regionally focused, have been deployed as local to generate a specific kind of social reality that constitute nonhuman animals as actors in unpredictable ways. Instead, these rhizomatic accounts have functionally demonstrated and made legible the entangled biographical and political lives of nonhumans. It is important to stress that this vantage point, in positing the local as multispecies, attempts to avoid the pitfalls of exoticising nature or reifying nonhumans as nature.

Therefore, the primacy of relation that marks multispecies ethnography could be traced back to the decolonizing impulse of postcolonial studies where the ethical subject does not imply sameness but a radical alterity that is unknowable. Unlike the traditional anthropological subject who is a recognised social entity, the ethical subject in postcolonial studies is accessible through relational encounters. At the same time, for postcolonial others, the radical other is a non-western other and their irretrievable heterogeneity is outside of western philosophy's formulations. How can we account for this location of relation as postcolonial or the postcolonial as location of relation in multispecies ethnography?

The postcolonial local is easily reducible to an instance of locality in a global world where local ecological commitments can subvert the metanarrative of globalisation. The transnational turn, most evident in ecocriticism and literary studies, positions local

histories within situated readings of places that are implicated in global issues of race, gender, and class, and as a better methodological tool to appraise global flows of capital (see Heise 2008; Ahuja 2009). Moreover, the postcolonial local can appear to be a historical microcosm where there is space for resistance against the overwhelming power of capitalism. In such a theorisation, the local is an example of the multiple voices and multiple actors (human and nonhuman) that need to be registered for more expansive notions of multispecies justice. This generosity of diversity or a strand of cosmopolitanism can make history look unimportant in the general picture it offers and can in its worst forms lead to an environmental orientalism or a “dehistoricization of non-western peoples and nature” (Mount and Brien 527; see also Guha 1989).

This in turn can raise the question whether a postcolonial critique is necessary or if simply a Marxist one will do, as animals are resources and food in a factory scale that is unparalleled. In a related vein, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2012) suggests that the postcolonial scale has to be stretched to be useful to address climate change and other such planetary phenomena that can adversely affect the planet as a whole in the Anthropocene (“Climate Change” 1). Chakrabarty’s careful critique hinges on showing how the anthropological difference that the postcolonial subject makes explicit is necessary to challenge a rights-bearing Eurocentric human subject but is less effective against the human of the Anthropocene where humans are acting like a geological force on the planet. Notwithstanding the human exceptionalism that is the undercurrent of this declensionist thinking, Chakrabarty is interested in how the human species and how human history are challenged by the Anthropocene and the reorientation of the human this challenge demands.

Chakrabarty’s point is different to Kirksey and Helmreich’s formulation: “Multispecies ethnography contains a hidden ontology lurking within: that of ‘species’” (Kirksey & Helmreich 563). Here, the species is not only the human species that is independently responsible or a victim of anthropogenic change but a multiplying world of different species where “entangled agents torque one another in ongoing loops of multispecies intra-actions” (Kirksey 776). Thus, even if postcoloniality is overrun and overdetermined by capitalism, modernity or the Anthropocene, multispecies ethnography shows how local effects of capital or state power can be differentiated in the radical heterogeneity of encounters that are spatial. This is not to affix some romanticising notion of purity to the local that cannot be claimed in a world of networks and flows of capital alone but how multispecies communities offer counterproposals and different hybridities. The “in-between” spaces that Homi Bhabha describes are not a separate world and deny any essentialist claims as “reading from the transferential perspective, where the Western ratio returns to itself from the time lag of the colonial relation, then we see how modernity and postmodernity are themselves constituted from the marginal perspective of colonial difference. They encounter themselves contingently at the point at which the internal difference of their own society is reiterated in terms of the difference of the other, the alterity of the postcolonial site” (39-40). To narrate the ongoingness of the postcolonial in its non-sequential relation to colonization is to adequately address the

local as a distinctive site and not just situate it as networked and glued into a grand narrative of globalisation to which all alterities are supposedly assimilable.

Let us take one trope: co-constitution, which is frequently used in multispecies ethnography to signify how nonhuman animal lives are bound up with ours. This trope is certainly a Latourian inheritance which, in deeming nonhuman animals as co-actors, invites them into the collective that figures prominently in political and social life and therefore plays a role in the social construction of facts. The ethnographer can then be attentive to the hidden players and through his ethnography anoint them as co-actors (see O’Gorman and Gaynor 2021). However, such positions overlook an important insight from postcolonial studies about asymmetrical hierarchies where the local, despite its connectivities to the global, is not just another site where entangled relations are duplicated. Such a tableaux of co-constituted actors signals another kind of standardized environmental justice that explains away the prevailing social conditions by perfunctorily including the nonhuman. This move undercuts what is local for the local actors which is not homogeneous.

In her nuanced ethnography of “crooked cats” (tigers, leopards and lions deemed as man-eaters), Nayanika Mathur (2021) records a contradiction which is instructive. The local people from across towns in Central Himalayas wanted crooked cats to be killed or captured immediately but they also blamed structural problems and human action and expressed sympathy for the persecuted cats. Such an analysis attentive to heterogeneity of species—people as well as nonhuman animals—also poses methodological difficulties for the re-presentation of the animal. To put it crudely, it may not be such a privilege for the animal to be foregrounded in local histories if the animal continues to be the fixed subject of violence. If the postcolonial replicates colonial structures of violence and oppression, then it may appear that in this postcolonial sameness there is nothing postcolonial about location or that the postcolonial subject has any history from below to tell. Gayatri Spivak, writing at the cusp of digital modernity, pondered on these dilemmas. She noted that postcolonial studies can become an “alibi” unless it is contextualised in its privileging of a lost object (“A Critique of Postcolonial Reason” 1). On the other hand, colonial discourse studies can reproduce neocolonial knowledge by representing only the colonised and the colonies by drawing a straight line from the past to the present where imperialism is in a distant past.

If reconfiguring a zoöpolis is necessarily a spatial process, then the local spaces have a critical role in creating those alternate worlds even if we may have a sense of planetary transformation (Wolch 1996). For example, Anand Vivek Taneja shows how popular ritual “operates in the register of subjunctive nostalgia, which performs the way the world *could have been*, in tension with what it is” with respect to the veneration of animal saints vis-à-vis the increasingly anthropocentric practices of reformist Islamic piety (209). What I want to suggest is that when we think about the postcolonial local, shaped by colonial histories, transnational connections, and environmental politics, there is also the particularity of the local that must not be swallowed up in other critical discourses. The local is more than a knotted-up arrangement of human and nonhuman subalterns; it is a world for actors who live in it. Multispecies ethnography’s focus on the



local as an irreducible particularity can bring out the environmental history of a particular region and the subalterns in that locality as well as depict the human-nonhuman intersections as vignettes of a hierarchical world that must be redesigned by activists and theorists. We see this most fruitfully in Radhika Govindarajan's ethnographic exploration of interspecies relations in the Central Himalayas where the wildness—so crucial to colonial and postcolonial conservation policies—is not entirely determined by either and constructs a subalternist history that is local: “as it bears indelible traces of racial meaning and the workings of sovereign colonial power, contains within it the potential for an otherwild, a messy wildness that reconfigures, unsettles, and exceeds the ways in which it is framed in projects of colonial and caste domination or in fantasies of human mastery of the nonhuman” (12). The local is not a mirror site. It is irreducibly particular in its histories and hierarchies and the fate of the nonhumans in that story must be described and challenged.

## Collective

Deborah Bird Rose's work draws attention to the “situated connectivities that bind us into multi-species communities” and the need to restate such configurations in the Anthropocene (87). Documenting the variety of lived realities of humans and nonhumans ethnographically can resist a monolithic conception of multispecies communities as abstract formations motivated solely by an ethics of care. Multispecies communities complicate notions of human agency and show how animals can resist roles ascribed to them. Members of a community are governed by biopolitics and a postcolonial critique can reveal what attitudes and traditions modify membership in a community (see Gandhi 2006). For example, Indian traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism have a long history of highlighting the fluid relationships between humans and animals. The motifs of non-injury to living beings (*ahimsa*), rebirth of all living beings (*samsara*), friendliness (*maitri*) towards all living things, and devotion to the good of all creatures (*sarva-bhuta-hita*) indicate a rich awareness of species interdependencies. It is widely theorised how religious beliefs propel animal protection, such as in the case of *gauseva* (cow welfare) which in turn propel fundamentalist religious ideologies that envision communities based on exclusion of non-members (Narayanan, “Cow Protection” 331). At the same time, animal welfare organizations in contemporary India trace their lineage to anti-imperialists whose demand for animal rights along with other social causes promised an “ideal community, a utopian order of things” (Gandhi 8; see also Dave 2014).

In my ethnographic work on street dogs in Kerala in India, I have recently looked at how street dogs were legitimised as members of a multispecies community during the pandemic as they began to starve from hunger and people began to feed them. Animal rights organisations appealed to what I call synergic suffering, which is based on “an implicit recognition that the other is undergoing a similar experience as you and therefore, warrants a response” (8). As a postcolonial state visible on the international stage, there was a lot of pressure on the Kerala government to develop effective human-centric policy but the centrality of compassion in Indian animal welfare laws temporarily

positioned street dogs as members of the community who needed food during the pandemic.

To understand these contingent communities, I want to consider the ontological and material politics of the multispecies assembly that is at the heart of postcolonial multispecies ethnography by distinguishing it from the Latourian collective. In this context, to talk of a postcolonial multispecies ethnography is to a) reconstitute communities as more-than-human and b) consider the type of relations that must exist for nonhuman animals to be part of a community. Latour's democratising project in *The Politics of Nature* (2004) destabilises the distinction between the dualist frame of a nonhuman nature and a human society where the scientist relays information from the nature to the social. In the dualist model, nature and society are divided and the model of the collective extends to include both human and nonhuman members. He proposes that in a true democracy of human and nonhuman actants, entities should be admitted into the common world through terms such as perplexity, consultation, hierarchy, and institutions would be collectively determined by scientists and politicians (91-121).

Matthew Watson brings Latour's representative democracy into dialogue with Chakrabarty's theory of the subaltern pasts to interrogate the limits of the relational networks that are common to both the projects. For Chakrabarty, subaltern pasts remain unrepresentable because they cannot be assimilated into a new all-encompassing narrative that propounds a unitary theory of historical truth. Latour's proposal is for specialist humans to become spokespersons to construct a cosmopolitical "common world" or, in other words, a multispecies collective that affords representation to those without human speech or language (57). What Watson is interested in is how some entities are clearly excluded from this collective and a negative category would appear to be forming externally containing all those who are not get welcomed in (59-62). Latour's representational capacity hinging on relational networks also seems to render a postcolonial position as the meta-organisational mode of spokespersons (much like the United Nations, or worse, the UN Security Council) that would strive towards the "progressive composition of the common world" (8).

A postcolonial perspective would be cautious of such a transcendental project, notwithstanding the promise of non-anthropocentrism, egalitarianism and democracy. After all, colonial violence was perpetrated in the guise of civilising missions aimed at elevating the native by promising them admission into a common world of peace, nobility and progress. Latour's externalisation is important here because it seems to be uncannily similar to the fate of the subaltern as the marginalised are made subordinate or deemed insignificant as enemies or aliens (191). Representational politics of animals, in fact, play out in realpolitik terms precisely in the form of a democracy into which some animals are invited on the basis of sentience while some remain out of the community's purview.

Ambika Aiyadurai's *Tigers are Our Brothers: Anthropology of Wildlife Conservation in Northeast India* (2021) discusses the positionality of conservation workers who seek to protect tigers in Dibang valley in Arunachal Pradesh and the various notions of community "embedded in hierarchy, power, and politics" (21). Instead of the locals or the local wildlife being perceived as separate communities, she emphasizes the tussle for

power and the tensions that emerge in reconstitution as actors from diverse backgrounds come together to discuss the rich biodiversity of the valley. She points out that there is no notion of nation or borders for wildlife but an “ecological nationalism” motivates the politics in the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary (20). These “conservation imaginaries” situate the tiger cubs in a pristine nature in harmony with indigenous people and Aiyadurai’s ethnographic detailing of the Mishmi people who believe tigers are their brothers offers a different set of relationships on human-animal relations (22). For the Mishmi people, the community comprises of spirits and tigers but these relations are bound with their social practices, such as farming or hunting or rearing domesticated animals. Aiyadurai’s postcolonial multispecies ethnography details the tensions that emerge when this community is forced to redefine itself when it comes into contact with the wildlife conservation ethos from mainland India.

## Representation

In her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Spivak warns against dominant discourses—both intellectual and political—and their gross generalisations on behalf of the third world “masses.” For Spivak, they conflate two distinct meanings of representation: “proxy and portrait”, or speaking for in the case of political representation, and speaking about and speaking in the name of an Other that is constructed (“The Post-colonial Critic” 108). Three implications follow for multispecies ethnography. One, *who* speaks? Postcolonial criticism has tended to be interdisciplinary as well as attentive to the power of the discipline and the privilege of its practitioners to define it (see Chakrabarty 1992; Spivak 1999). Who writes multispecies ethnography and from where? Spivak writes about herself as the native informant who speaks on behalf of her community and in “clinging to marginality” may essentialise the ethnic other (“Outside in the Teaching Machine” 9). Two, *whom* do we speak for? The postcolonial critic also asks who is being represented since the subaltern escapes representation, and cannot easily speak or in the case of nonhuman animals, speak in human language. Spivak also refers to the “benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other” where the represented is a placeholder for theoretical analysis or an ahistorical portrayal of the other (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 289). Third, *how* do we speak for the subaltern who cannot speak or who is silenced?

Ilan Kapoor in his careful reading of Spivak’s work notes five different ways in her oeuvre to at least partially overcome these obstacles (640-644): a) intimately inhabiting and negotiating discourse by deconstructing dominant discourses within which one is situated; b) acknowledging complicity about one’s own position; c) unlearning one’s privilege to retrain oneself out of their discipline’s prejudices and biases; d) Learning from the ground to begin to learn from the subaltern; and e) working without guarantees as the subaltern is heterogeneous and non-narratable and becoming aware of the flaws in a representation.

Multispecies ethnography is already aware of these difficulties since animals do not speak human language. It “seeks to understand the world as materially real, partially

knowable, multicultural and multinatured, magical, and emergent through the contingent relations of multiple beings and entities” (Ogden *et al.* 6). Sara Ahmed, writing on trauma and communication, suggests that the ethical encounter is not to be found through presence but through “other speech acts, scars and traumas, that remain unspoken, unvoiced or not fully spoken or voiced” (156). As a project, subaltern studies, for example, sought to recover the subject and thereby discover the agency of that lost subject (see O’Hanlon 1988). Postcolonial critique enthusiastically focused on myths, cults and ideologies that were appropriated by dominant colonial historiography. However, the quest for a subaltern agent did not always lead to a discovery of subaltern agency. Gyan Prakash notes that the “moment of rebellion always contained within it the moment of failure” (1480). Sporadic acts of resistance and absence of conventional records makes it difficult to not only attribute autonomy to the subaltern but also to recover it. Since the subaltern is irretrievably heterogeneous and unknowable, postcolonial criticism has attempted to locate the subaltern in the precarity of interstices, margins and gaps.

Multispecies ethnography has turned to different methods such as those from natural history, ethology and other scientific methods to “torque” them to figure the nonhuman animal (see Swanson 2017; Mathews 2018; Hartigan 2021). The self-reflexivity stems from a realisation that traditional fieldwork reliant on the observational prowess of the human ethnographer may not be useful in studying nonhuman subjects and their relationships. In negotiating the ethics of representation, should multispecies ethnographers attend to postcolonial difference in the same vein as they do about animal otherness?

A multisensorial approach could be one way to figure the nonhumans—the chapping calls of a house lizard, the soft croaking of a frog around the rain, the webs of a spider or its prey caught in it or around it like wings after a meal, the swift passing of a cockroach over you in the dark, the tell-tale stench of a rat or swarming of flies that come in when you turn on the tube light. A postcolonial multispecies ethnography can learn from and with these “unseen others” if we rethink methodologies and theoretical approaches to move beyond text and sight as Spivak suggests. Like Fijn and Kavesh who employ the term “sensory anthropology,” a combination of sensory ethnography and multispecies anthropology (6), and Tsing who uses the “arts of noticing” (370) to denote the toolkit which researchers need to effectively learn from and with more than human animals, a postcolonial multispecies ethnography focuses on a variety of sensory elements that opens up new avenues for thinking meaningfully and critically about our entanglement with the more-than-humans.

However, animal subjects in a postcolonial multispecies ethnography are not only found in interstices of human relations. For example, the “transspecies” spaces (Narayanan, “Subaltern Animism” 3) of India present a picture of mutual living that fully realises the more-than-human imperative of multispecies ethnography. The animal self is not only a textual embodiment or a being to be recovered through narration; the animal is present in social practices and traditions but also very much in reality.

In their work on macaques in urban India, Maan Barua and Anindya Sinha bring ethology into conversation with geography to understand what urbanisation means for the macaques. In foregrounding the animal lifeworlds, their subalternist project considers what it means for nonhuman knowledges to count as expertise in urban governance which is usually a bureaucratic, human enterprise. This interdisciplinary project reinterprets biological behaviors of the macaques to consider urban governance and its consequences for the macaques. In tracing the affective responses to macaques among people and in reorienting the macaque's ability to cause "trouble" in urban spaces, they flesh out notions of macaque knowledge and "enskilment" (1170). The postcolonial history of cohabitation represents a macaque who is agential, wilful and ecological (1160-1180).

Lastly, since multispecies ethnography is a mode of representation of animal subjects in different locations, it must not aim to recover a humanistic conception of the animal shaped by a discourse of human and animal rights. The ethical project thus envisioned would be starkly different from the ethical project of the subaltern historiographer who is confronted with the "systematic fragmentation of the record of subalternity" (Prakash 1483). This can lead to dilemmas and expectations—both moral and disciplinary—because of the crisis inaugurated by the Anthropocene and more broadly, by the continuous exploitation and extinction of animals in the Anthropocene (see Wadivel 2015). Will it be possible to retain an irretrievable heterogeneity of nonhuman subjects if the category is itself under siege? The ethnographer realises that the subaltern is the unwitnessed and the unspoken, ensnared in the dominant structures of oppression and there is no full recovery of the subaltern possible. However, if not a full, even a partial recovery is imperative to undercut anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. Multispecies ethnography engages with this tension by emphasising the emergence as well as the oppression of the subaltern agency in dominant discourses.

## Decolonization

How can multispecies ethnography be decolonial? Multispecies ethnography, in its attempt to foreground the elusive nonhuman, often relies on the tropes of wonder and enchantment to bring to our attention those we overlook (Ogden *et al.* 5). The associated turn towards attention and cultivation of attentiveness grants the ethnographer or the researcher much power in the form of observation and the sensibility to bring the previously hidden animals to the foreground (see Tsing 17; Rose and van Dooren 2011). This, coupled with the hyper self-reflexivity required of the ethnographer in decentering themselves to centre non-anthropocentric ways of being, can coalesce into an ethical project of reclaiming an ecological sensibility that is western in its approach (Guha, "A Third World Critique" 1-7). While this is certainly laudable, there is a risk of the unassimilable subaltern being further marginalised in such endeavors as the postcolonial ethnography, in its messy navigation of colonial and indigenous modernity, rarely leads to positions that meet the western criteria of animal rights (see Ahuja 2021). This produces to two difficulties: one, the animal subaltern seems hopelessly caught in neocolonial structures

of oppression and violence, such that no agency or autonomy can be attributed to them. This is soundly refuted by subaltern historiography that proves that agency thus denied comes from a potted history with humans as protagonists or a history from above. Two, the animal subaltern seems located within an ever-multiplying field of relations such that they appear decentered within their own histories. Confronted by hegemonic structures of trenchant colonial and neocolonial powers in such histories, it may appear that the subaltern indeed cannot speak.

One way to disentangle these issues is to explicitly link the decolonizing impulse to conceptions of multispecies justice which work against various premises of human exceptionalism: “a) that humans are physically separate or separable from other species and non-human nature, b) that humans are unique from all other species because they possess minds (or consciousness) and agency and c) that humans are therefore more important than other species” (Srinivasan & Kasturirangan 125-128 qtd. in Hayes *et al* 2022). Sinha and Bhaishya alert us to other possibilities by invoking the work of Sylvia Wynter and her work on the “genres of the human” (6). For Wynter, the Eurocentric human and human becoming is in the mode of the secular liberal monohumanism. Postcolonial representations must work against reinscribing the Eurocentric human as the type of human we expect to be in relation with nonhumans. The oft-quoted passage by Neel Ahuja from *Bioinsecurities* (2016) brings the theoretical considerations to the fore; problematising the celebratory nature of posthumanism:

This move allows some posthumanist critics to project upon an outside, the nonhuman (in the form of environment, animal, machine, or other object), the possibility of resistance to anthropocentrism. Such thinking might be seen as a ruse of transcendence—an assumption that turning attention from the human to the nonhuman could bypass Marxist, feminist, critical race, and postcolonial critiques of imperial systems that proliferate inequality under the guise of universal human freedom. (viii)

A decolonial multispecies ethnography must take issue with human exceptionalism but also remain attentive to the figure of the human, for the human who is to be destabilized is not an ahistorical, abstract category which when usurped by the nonhuman can readily institute the nonhuman in its own place. For multispecies ethnography, this has two important implications: firstly, the animal subject will have to be situated in alternative political structures outside the “Eurocentric narrative of humanity” (Sinha and Bhaishya 8). The danger is that otherwise we may extrapolate a common human-animal sociality, thereby unwittingly replicating a Eurocentric idea of human-animal sociality. Secondly, the postcolonial multispecies frame must be careful not to reproduce the oldest trick in the book, which is to invite animal subjects to enter the monohumanist narrative by expanding the framework of human rights. At the same time, postcolonial multispecies ethnography should not shy away from the question of the ethical and what and how that would like for animals and for a multispecies society.

The particularism that both fields aim for can appear to be upholding violent structures and perpetuating a passivity that further silences the subaltern under the guise of cultural relativism. Postcolonial studies has always been closely connected with emancipatory projects for its colonial critique and for demonstrating the interlinked oppressions of caste, gender, and religion (Young 64). In its interrogation of identities and

a politics of difference, it has drawn on interdisciplinary work to relinquish a dominant history, or what Spivak called catachresis: “reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value coding” (“Postcoloniality and Value” 228). The call for interdisciplinarity in multispecies ethnography should be simultaneously attentive to non-anthropocentric ways of figuring the nonhuman animal as well as the politics of difference and location.

Krithika Srinivasan’s decade-long engagement with street dogs in India is an exemplar of decolonising the discipline. Srinivasan highlights the material lives of street dogs in an attempt to situate them outside the neocolonial politics of conservation that cannot engage with the street dog as an animal subaltern. Within conservation politics, so intimately shaped by colonial politics, street dogs are problems for pristine ecologies that can only be populated by valuable or charismatic species (see Home *et al.* 2018). By framing them as zoonotic carriers that require biomedical and biopolitical control, state and conservation politics co-opt colonial patterns of exorcising of the “exemplary noxious other” to further silence the street dog (3). Srinivasan’s work aims to historicise and understand the multispecies community that the street dog is part of through a careful investigation of local relationships between people and street dogs. In the process, she discovers alliances, a fragile tolerance and perspectives that accept street dogs as “*paavam*” (innocent, poor), and hence companions and occupants in a multispecies world (7).

### **Conclusion: Re-dignifying the Postcolonial Localopolis**

Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the “postcolonial critique of the subject was actually a deeper turning towards the human” (“Climate Change” 4). To bring multispecies ethnography into conversation with postcolonial studies is to be acutely aware of the latter’s avoidance of the nonhuman as a prospective subaltern. Thus, the cross-currents between the two fields must confront the principal danger the postcolonial human subject fears which is if association with the nonhuman subaltern relegates the human subject into a paradigm of dehumanisation or base animality.

In her discussion of the cosmopolis and what she calls the localopolis, Rukmini Bhaya Nair (2017) discusses the inherent contradictions and dangers of valorising a postcolonial space as the local which would be a suitable space to confront the world capitals of power, development and modernity. The localopolis is the “territory of the unspoken”, a place of “tacit enmities” (148). She describes how she had shared in a western perception of Timbuktu as an “outlandish wilderness” till she read Kamau Brathwaite who “re-dignified” Timbuktu for her in his decolonized vision so different from a cosmopolis imagined by Walter Benjamin or Umberto Eco (151). The localopolis carries within itself anxieties such as rootlessness which are “doppelgangers of otherness” but it also could have an archive that helps its inhabitants connect its present to pasts and alternative futures (157).

Similarly, the postcolonial animal in the localopolis can be portrayed easily as a secondary character of this peripheral slice of life; more than a symbol but subject to

cultural contexts that tell human stories. Accounts of reciprocity and relationality that elide what is asked of the nonhuman animal, whether it be labour, love or sacrifice (or all three in many cases) are mistellings that are sympathetic only to the human other in the localopolis. My suggestion is that a postcolonial rendering of an animal subaltern in relation must, in addition to the complex picture of networks it relates, also redignify the animal subject in multispecies ethnography. This is not to say that an ethically enriched version of the animal subject must be “invented” when there is no real-world referent of this subjectivity or that dignity be indulgently extended to animals as a benevolent, but ultimately, anthropocentric act.

The postcolonial localopolis holds within its interrelated constellations not only asteroids, supernovas, and galaxies in a dynamic matrix but also more relatively stable “observation posts” (150). From these observation posts, we must methodically scan the terrain and attempt to realise the embodied perspectives of those multiple beings that live in and around these locales. To redignify is to take seriously the postcolonial position and the decolonizing visions of those humans and nonhumans who live in ways and pasts that we call the global south. To redignify is not to simply elevate the animal to the level of the human nor is it to ask the human to level down.

For Spivak, redignifying would be inspired by deconstruction: “to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility” (“In Other Worlds” 201). As the examples of multispecies ethnography that I have cited in my essay show, anthropocentrism can be frustrated in numerous ways that allow the postcolonial animal to speak. Nevertheless, in this quest to re-dignify and to re-present, the ethnographer opens himself up to criticism. How can the multispecies ethnographer be equipped with “hyper-self-reflexivity” (Kapoor 2004)? There are two dangers here, in fact, common to ethnography and postcolonial criticism. One, as the “global south” gains prominence in contemporary parlance, multispecies ethnography faces the same challenge to not turn the postcolonial spaces into celebrated places of multispecies living and by extension, cultural difference. Second, which is more insidious, is that of the metaphysical transparency that can accompany the ethnographer simply because they know they want to study animals or focus on animals leading to an “orthodoxy of the local” (Mckinnon 22-34). This would preemptively make the ethnographer’s work a project of benevolent paternalism where nonhuman animals cannot say anything new.

To redignify is to situate human social worlds as entangled with animal life worlds such that the enervation of the animal is not necessary to chart those shared worlds ethnographically. For multispecies ethnography, animals are not the background for human politics and agencies. In the postcolonial multispecies ethnography, animals are more than dwellers and co-participants in a troubled and shared world and they are shaped and affected by human politics and visions of development, progress and modernity. Furthermore, the animal is not a free-floating agent of history impacted by changing fates of those in power; they are possessors of “interior landscapes of identity” (Venn 27). Anthropodenial (de Waal 2) would further subalternize the animal; and an uncritical anthropomorphism would essentialise them and make them human. The house



lizard flees when you approach it, and a street dog knows what it could mean when a human bends down to pick something up. The postcolonial animal has a notion of the human. The puzzle that postcolonial studies presents multispecies ethnography with is this: how do we figure the interior landscapes of those animals marked by identity, memory and sociality as we envision the shared worlds to reconstruct their animal identities *in situ*? (see Kraniauskas 2000). If we take seriously the continuities that the five shared features that I have discussed then the animal cannot be a perpetual subaltern in a constant state of abjection. The zoöpolis, after all, is a polis where norms are generated.

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