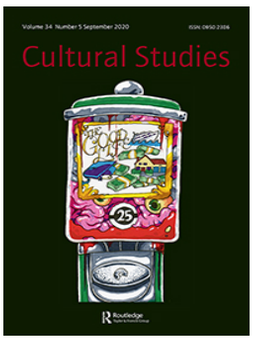

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Off-centring empire in the Anthropocene: towards multispecies intimacies and nonhuman agents of survival

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines colonial legacies in human-nonhuman relations to off-centre empire in the Anthropocene. Imperial methods of collecting, preserving and displaying *nature* profoundly shaped species perception, which in turn affected the scientific attention and ecological relevance a species was granted. In particular, I reflect on the category of *invasibility* to show how empire sanctioned the mobility of specific population groups and animal species as border-crossing. This further shows how speciesist logics served to extend, maintain and legitimize imperial power. This analysis is relevant in the Anthropocene where invasibility is mobilised to police movement in the context of increased human and nonhuman migration. Further, I discuss how invasibility is considered as one of main threats for biodiversity, which may misdirect conservation efforts. Overall, the article examines the potential in human-nonhuman encounters to challenge colonial legacies. Based on an ethnographic example of multispecies homemaking with species considered invasive in (hetero)normative modes of intimacy and domesticity, I argue that colonial legacies of racialized, gendered and speciesist hierarchies can be disturbed by human-nonhuman relations of companionship, care and interdependence. Finally, I scale-up the analysis to the landscape, by tracing the transformation of a former imperial wasteland in Vienna's peripheral South from being perceived as economically and aesthetically worthless to a natural monument. Attending to multispecies entanglements is key here to understand the transformative process that led to the recovery of this wasteland. Here I off-centre empire by challenging anthropocentric narrations of how landscape transforms in favour of a narration that re-centres nonhuman agency. I argue that stories of wasteland recovery guided by nonhuman animals are crucial due to the increase in industrial wasteland and environmental degradation in the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS Nonhuman agency; intimacy; multispecies; Anthropocene; empire

Introduction

In his 2015 film *The Lobster*, Yorgos Lanthimos utilizes the grotesque stylistic form to explore the contemporary moment as one marked by increasing

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incapacity to live together and form meaningful bonds. Punished by sinister matchmakers for their inability to find a romantic partner, the characters of Lanthimos' film are at risk to be turned into animals, destined to roam the forest among human 'loners', those who live lives of awkward, cold encounters after escaping the matchmaking facility. The forest encounters between estranged humans and once-human animals exemplify the ever-increasing alienation of contemporary capitalism, celebrated as independence and freedom of choice. Yet, seen in the context of a historical anthropogenic threat on earthly livelihoods, The Lobster also points to the necessity of addressing collective challenges by learning how to live together. As in Lanthimos' film, dwelling in a profoundly transformed world requires a new web of relations among all living beings, a necessary precursor to addressing the climate crisis, the progressing sixth mass extinction and further environmental degradation.

This paper explores how multispecies encounters and their concomitant intimacies may point to this new world, tracing the working of more-than-human relations within and off-centre to the legacies of empire. Attending to nonhuman agency is key in the Anthropocene, whose crises are understood here as 'seismic shockwave[s]' of colonialism (see Davis and Todd 2017, p. 774).[1] Departing from the acknowledgement of this intimate connection between the Anthropocene and colonial imperialism (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017, Gómez-Barris 2017), I examine how lingering colonial legacies in human-nonhuman relations surface in measures of species conservation and wasteland recovery. I then turn to the potential residing in human-nonhuman encounters to challenge colonial legacies by establishing relations of companionship, care and interdependence.

The first section discusses how historical processes of species perception have been shaped by the imperial project of collecting, preserving and displaying. Debunking how colonial legacies continue to shape the cultural and ecological relevance granted to species is key in the Anthropocene because such taxonomies affect, for instance, the choices made in species conservation. In particular, I discuss how empire instrumentalizes *invasibility*, a characteristic applied to both human and nonhuman animals, whose alleged mobility is sanctioned and categorized as border-crossing. Accordingly, this section discusses how in the Anthropocene these colonial logics inform debates on biodiversity, in which invasibility is considered a main threat.

The second section moves to a more personal, intimate level, in which I trace how the domestic sphere, as a site in which colonial legacies surface, has also the potential to challenge them. Drawing on ethnographic material, I trace how the radical ethics of a woman in Guatemala City upset the imposed speciesist hierarchies of colonialism by making home with species usually considered invasive in (hetero)normative modes of intimacy and domesticity.

Here, empire is off-centred through human-nonhuman encounters of intimacies and kinship.

In the third section, I trace the transformation of a former imperial wasteland in Vienna's peripheral South from being perceived as economically and aesthetically worthless to a natural monument. Attending to multispecies entanglements is key here to understand the transformative process that led to the recovery of this wasteland. This section off-centres empire by challenging anthropocentric narrations of how landscape transforms in favour of a narration that re-centres nonhuman agency. To be sure, stories of wasteland recovery guided by nonhuman animals, such as the one I recount, matter in the Anthropocene due to the increase in industrial wasteland and environmental degradation.

Off-centring empire in the Anthropocene highlights the fragmentations and ruptures left behind by colonial imperialism translating into a sense of disconnection of varying degrees. The article invites to consider possibilities that open up pathways towards a radically changed, decolonial companionship among all living beings by turning to nonhuman agency and multispecies entanglements (Haraway 2008, Kohn 2013, de la Cadena 2015). Relationality is central to decolonial studies and, for instance, it is expressed through the concept of 'vincularidad' in the sense of an 'awareness of the integral relation and interdependence amongst all living organisms (in which humans are only a part) with territory or land and the cosmos' that 'disturb[s] the totality from which the universal and the global are most often perceived' (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, p. 1). In this article, I mobilize this concept to emphasize the importance of interdependence when navigating the Anthropocene with its shifting grounds, currents and air (Ingold 2010). Hence off-centring empire in the Anthropocene means to off-centre anthropocentrism by recognizing nonhuman animals as agents of survival in the Anthropocene.

Empire's enemies: challenging human and nonhuman *invasibility*

Colonial logics of hierarchizing nonhuman life remain deeply embedded in aesthetic discourses. As the following section shows, a personal childhood memory of an encounter with 'undesirable' life can reveal the ways in which colonial and imperial modes of difference inform our affective understanding of nonhuman worth. It is a hot summer day in the 1990s in Northern Germany, as I am driving my bicycle. The road is covered with hundreds of slugs that appeared in the aftermath of a summer rain. The many slug bodies squashed flat on the asphalt tell me of the cyclists that passed along this road before me. While I carefully try to navigate the slugs, I am sure to have caused unintentionally some fatal collisions. Propelled by feelings of disgust at the sight of the many creeping (and seemingly creepy) slugs in

the naïve imagination of my child-self, I hastily continue my journey, careful not to touch the ground with my feet to avoid any direct contact with the slugs.

Many invertebrates, including both molluscs and insects, are often associated with monster-like attributes – creeping and flying, slimy and (supposedly) hairy, filthy and ugly, nocturnal and uncanny, stinging, harmful and dangerous, transmitting diseases and occurring in masses, hard to control and subversive. This is particularly true in Euro-Western contexts as well as places that have been heavily exposed and subjected to Euro-Western thought through imperial colonialism. I would like to establish a link here between the aesthetic perception and appeal of a species with practices of collecting, studying, and representing them that emerged with empire. Slugs offer interesting insights into these biased processes, particularly in comparison to snails, to whom they are related, but who have a better 'reputation'.

Early European scientific expeditions propelled efforts (and illusions) of systematic classification in the homes of the colonial powers. Expeditions returned with large numbers of collected, traded or stolen animals, plants and minerals as well as kidnapped humans. Contrary to the narratives of natural history museums, which suggest totality and universality, such processes of collecting, conserving, classifying and curating were far more messy and biased. Particularly before the nineteenth century, 'the influence of aesthetic perception on the taxonomization of animal species' was quite pronounced, 'judg[ing] the visual appearance of organisms not just in a biological sense but in an aesthetic sense as well' (Heymans 2012, p. 3). Rather than the orderly and systematic process that the methods and language of biologists hope to convey, it seems likely that 'our conception of species is the result of a complex historical process' (Heymans 2012, p. 3). Hence, similarly to my avoidance of the slugs based on feelings of disgust, the alleged objectivity in collecting and classifying nonhuman life is highly questionable.

Certain animals, such as snails, could be easily collected to be preserved, transported, and represented because of their physical features. Their shells of various colours and forms do not require much taxidermic treatment. In comparison, collecting, preserving, and putting slugs on display is more complex due to their lack of a shell (as well as becoming aware of their presence in the first place). The aesthetic experience of seeing shells on display in glass cases in their myriad varieties of patterns and colours was considered more pleasing than the bodies of slugs floating in a preservative solution. According to Peter L. Reischütz, an Austrian malacologist studying the dispersion of slugs in Austria, the dependency on alternative markers for classification in absence of a shell has also contributed to widespread errors in identifying slug species (Reischütz 1986, p. 71). As lamented by Reischütz, such 'inconvenience' in studying slugs, also explains their

underrepresentation in scientific studies, as the animals require more elaborate methods of collecting, preserving and identifying. This underrepresentation stands in stark contrast to the significance of slugs in ecosystems and underestimates their ecological relevance (Reischütz 1986, pp. 70, 72). Hence, the methods employed for collecting, preserving and curating all influenced how a species is ultimately perceived both aesthetically and with regard to their value.

To this day, slugs maintain a comparative elusiveness with regard to efforts of the collection, classification and studying, which themselves gained momentum during colonialism. This elusiveness amounts to a somewhat uncanny presence in the interstices of rigid scientific knowledge, representation and aesthetic appeal. While the perception of a species as 'ugly' does not preclude it entirely from collection and representation (here the cabinets of curiosities as precursors to museums come to mind) there is a correlation between the aesthetic perception of a species and the (scientific) attention it attracts (Link 2007). In fact, several studies found that more funding can be mobilized for the studying and conservation of a particular species in relation to their aesthetic appeal, positive cultural connotations and similarity to humans (Daston and Mitman 2005, Small 2012, Martín-Forés *et al*. 2013). Hence, a species' examination in scientific studies further impacts on its positioning in speciesist hierarchies of cultural and ecological value.

Supported by these findings, conservation efforts largely centre around so-called 'flagship species', which are almost exclusively vertebrates, specifically mammals like elephants and lions. Tellingly, widely-circulating images of lonely polar bears on floating ice sheets surrounded by the vast ocean constitute a key visual anchor in campaigns aiming to raise awareness of the climate crisis. The cognitive dissonance of witnessing a species perceived as majestic in distress may almost certainly mobilize people and money, supported by powerful emotions such as pity. However, the efficiency of the 'flagship species' approach to conservation is contested as its promise to preserve the biodiversity of a landscape is far from successful (Simberloff 1998, Muñoz 2007). Hence, in the Anthropocene, conservation efforts based largely on species' aesthetic appeal are highly problematic.

The existence of speciesist hierarchies is also responsible for misguiding conservation efforts. In the beginning of May 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) published a Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services suggesting that about one million species are at risk of extinction (IPBES 2019). The narrow focus on 'flagship species' in conservation, however, obscures the fact that 'the overwhelming majority of threatened species are likely to be invertebrates' (Muñoz 2007). With 75 percent of all animal species being insects, their role for biodiversity and ecosystems cannot be emphasized enough (IPBES 2019). As insects 'cycle nutrients, pollinate

plants, disperse seeds, maintain soil structure and fertility, control populations of other organisms, and provide a major food source for other taxa', issues of (human) food security and adaptability to diseases are profoundly related to the wellbeing of insect life (Scudder 2017). To be fair, the progressing sixth mass extinction and loss of biodiversity with its intrinsic connection to insect life did receive more attention lately in public discourse. However, this is often communicated solely through 'flagship species' such as the 'cute' honey bee. In other words, the 'flagship species' approach does not challenge underlying anthropocentric assumptions thus preserving the image of the human saviour. Further, the reproduction of speciesist hierarchies inscribes notions of loss for which some species are less grievable than others.

At the example of an encounter with slugs, in the first part of this section I traced how my affective reaction of disgust ties back to the imperial project of collecting and classifying nonhuman animal species. I outlined how Euro-Western thought and colonial imperialism shaped species perception through methods of collecting, preserving and curating that cultivate speciesist hierarchies with repercussions for today's conservation efforts. In the second part of this section I attend specifically to how empire instrumentalized *invasibility* as characteristic for both human and nonhuman animals in order to shape its domestic and foreign spheres. Beyond more general concerns with the legitimization of racialized and gendered hierarchies through 'nature', *invasibility* operates as a more specific tool of imperial border-making.

Returning to my childhood encounter with slugs illustrates how such formative experiences are informed by colonial legacies of collection and display. While for the naked eye is mostly impossible to identify slug species, I assume my encounter was with *Arion vulgaris*, colloquially known as the Spanish slug; the most common slug in Northern Germany. *Arion vulgaris* is considered a pest that threatens to outcompete 'native' slug species and it is 'listed among the 100 most invasive species in Europe' (Dörler *et al*. 2018, pp. 1–2). It is also easy to find advice on how to eradicate the Spanish slug, which eats its way through private vegetable gardens. In this section, I wish to further reflect on how invasibility, as characteristic for a nonhuman animal, adds another dimension to the ongoing analysis. I do so by recalling the affective reaction of disgust for slugs I experienced as a child and I relate it to colonial legacies of collecting, studying and displaying species.

Expanding on the analysis above, the more positive perception of snails in comparison to slugs is closely linked to their shells. The German term *Schneckenhaus* means literally 'snail house', while slugs appear to be snails, but without houses. Donna Haraway's fittingly describes the Anthropocene/'Chthulucene' as an 'earth […] full of refugees, human or not, without refuge' (Haraway 2016, p. 100). Considering how empire nurtured prejudice

and suspicion towards any 'unsettled' populations, whether in the context of homelessness, nomadism or migration at large, could my biased affective reaction to the 'homeless' snails be an expression of my own socialization into this lingering colonial legacy?

Addressing such questions requires a thorough engagement with the longue durée of imperial structures managing populations and places. Managing and 'settling' populations as well as controlling population movement has been key for imperial control and administration, extending itself into the contemporary nation-state (Berda 2013). Banu Subramaniam has analysed the 'remarkable parallels between the campaign against human immigrants and those of foreign plants and animals (…) seen as unhygienic and germ-ridden, [in which] colonial and racist narratives of dirt, disease, and hygiene abound' (Subramaniam 2014, p. 229). Historically, populations categorized as 'unsettled' and 'wandering' in the German context, whether Herero and Nama, Roma and Sinti, or Jewish people, experienced high levels of violence, including genocide (Wolfe 2006). Some of those atrocities have not been fully recognized or compensated by the Federal Republic of Germany and contemporary memory politics furthers selective forms of remembrance. Many of these population groups have been compared to invasive, alien animal species, further loosening inhibitions to commit violence against them. Under the Nazi regime Jewish people were vilified as 'vermin' (Marshall and Shapiro 2018, p. 775). In the Habsburg monarchy an advertisement for Zacherlin, a popular insecticide produced in Vienna at the time, depicted the insects to be eradicated as Ottomans, conjuring the persistent, versatile image of the 'Turkish enemy' nurtured since the Siege of Vienna by the Ottoman army in both 1529 and 1683 (Feichtinger and Heiss 2013, Kirbis 2020). Hence, characterizing humans with invasibility turned into an important tool for empire to control and sanction the mobility of specific population groups.

Invasibility enabled empire to shape its domestic and foreign spheres. Separating the human and nonhuman bodies into those that belonged and those that were considered invasive, empire employed 'nature' as border-making tool. Colonial imperialism used the prevalent distinction in Euro-Western thought between 'nature' and 'culture', in which 'nature' did not mean human-made, but the result of divine creation (Descola 2013). Thus, situating empire's claim to power, the course of its borders as well as its nightmare of invasion in its 'natural' surroundings offered the ultimate legitimization for its expansion and colonization, since it was considered 'natural' (Coen 2018, p. 343). Underpinned by a feeling of entitlement to territory and power, defending empire's physical borders conflated with defending a higher cause and morality. This resonates particularly well in the Viennese context due to the city's claim to be a bulwark of Christianity in the aftermath of the Ottoman Sieges (Gingrich 1998). Thus, employing invasibility as characteristic for nonhuman animals and plants as well as humans was a powerful tool

for empire to further its power through consolidating speciesist, racialized and gendered hierarchies that still figure today.

Making explicit how histories of species perception were embedded in colonial discourses is crucial in the Anthropocene, in which questions of invasibility come to the fore. The loss of biodiversity is a major concern in discourses on the Anthropocene, and invasive species are seen as the major drivers of this development. Portrayed as 'nature out-of-place', newly arriving, 'foreign' plants and animals are perceived as threats to the 'health' of local ecosystems and biodiversity (Subramaniam 2014, pp. 228–230). Some researchers have already suggested the concept of an 'entomogenic climate change' which sees insect-caused deforestation as further propelling the climate crisis (Dunn and Crutchfield 2018, p. 2). However, this approach may disproportionately focus on specific species, particularly insect species, as invasive instead of the factors disturbing the ecosystem that allowed for particular species to 'invade' in the first place. As Subramaniam argued, species marked as invasive usually flourish in already (anthropogenically) disturbed environments – hence it is rather that '[i]nvasibility emerges; it isn't a characteristic of species, and, as such, it has to be understood as a response to particular ecological habitats' (Subramaniam 2014, p. 234). Moreover, in the linguistic sense, invasibility suggests a hostile border-crossing from an external sphere to an internal sphere. Debates about invasive species often obscure that 'native species can also be invasive' and 'new arrivals can often help an ecosystem rather than hurt it' through increasing its biodiversity (Subramaniam 2014, pp. 234–235). Accordingly, colonial legacies of species perception, particularly through the lens of invasibility, may misdirect conservation and restoration measures to fight the loss of biodiversity in the Anthropocene.

Secondly, the emphasis on invasibility in debates on biodiversity reveals persisting colonial legacies of Euro-Western thought that conceptualize 'nature' as separate from 'culture' (Quijano 2007, pp. 172–174; de la Cadena 2019). Thereby, in this version of biodiversity, 'nature' must remain 'natural' (as opposed to human-made) and the balance of ecosystems can only be maintained when species do not cross the boundaries of their assigned habitats. However, in light of poleward-shifting climate zones species must move to survive. Maintaining deceptive visions of a 'nostalgic nature of yesteryear' is a harmful strategy to navigate the Anthropocene (Subramaniam 2014, p. 237). Instead of tackling the problems of the Anthropocene, such uses of invasibility further extend the very colonial logics that produced industrial capitalism and anthropogenic climate change.

Thirdly, invasibility continues to be misused as a tool to maintain speciesist, racialized and gendered hierarchies established under colonial imperialism. Such uses recall Donna Haraway's notion of the Anthropocene/ 'Chthulucene' as a boundary event, in which 'the earth is full of refugees, human or not, without refuge', (Haraway 2016, p. 100). In the Anthropocene, the unsettling

effects of environmental degradation and changing climate zones result in increased migration of human and nonhuman animals and plants alike. Sanctioning those migratory movements today re-enacts colonial violence in a two-fold manner. Firstly, it misconceives grossly the historical role of empire and colonial imperialism in the global dispersal of species and people. Since the fifteenth century, Indigenous ecosystems in the Americas have been uprooted by the forceful introduction of Old World flora and fauna, a strategic tool for the success of European conquest and domination (Crosby 1986). Secondly, it also denies the entanglements between colonial imperialism, the destruction of local eco- and social systems, and the emergence of the Anthropocene. The Industrial Revolution, which was reliant on the transatlantic slave trade and plantation system, is just one example for this repeating dynamic (Williams 1944, Dawson 2016, p. 47). Hence, using invasibility to characterize today's global migratory movements in fact testifies to the persistence of colonial legacies in navigating the Anthropocene.

Disturbing empire: homemaking through multispecies intimacies

Diametrically opposite to the imperial logic of invadable borders is the supposition that the world is a shared home between humans and non-humans alike. As this section explores, multispecies homemaking is essential to such a project, as a means to challenge colonial legacies from the intimate level. The section begins by highlighting the radical ethics of a woman in post-war Guatemala City, whose practice of making home with slugs, a species considered invasive in normative modes of intimacy and domesticity, upsets the imposed speciesist hierarchies of colonialism.

A couple of years ago during a trip to Guatemala, I had another unexpected encounter with slugs. Having agreed to accompany my friend Simón on a trip to visit his family, we were walking through his childhood neighbourhood in Guatemala City. I was looking forward to meet Daniela, one of Simón's best friends.[2] Their kinship-like friendship emerged from an urban web of relations formed among young, artistically engaged people that had escaped their conflicts at home to find refuge and companionship elsewhere. Both entered adulthood in the mid-1990s, while the country was just transitioning back to democratic rule after Guatemala's devastating civil war. Three decades of consecutive, U.S.-backed military dictatorships, culminating in the genocide committed under the regime of Ríos Montt in the early 1980s, severely affected and often disrupted family ties. The legacies of colonial violence linger on in today's racial, class and moral conflicts, discharging in intimate relations and social interactions.

Passing through Daniela's house, a patio opens up at the back side, accommodating the kitchen and laundry area as well as a dining area and second

living room. In this semi-open space, in the sense that a fourth wall is absent, the sunlight reflects many single, silvery lines on the floor tiles merging into a thick thread. On the walls, various shimmery traces in bizarre patterns also manifest the presence of other living beings in this house. At a closer look these appear clearly as the typical slime trails of slugs, the 'snails without a house', that found refuge here. If home reflects the 'life narrative' of its dweller, what fragments of Daniela's 'family saga' manifest in the traces (co)produced with the slugs (de Certeau *et al*. 1998, pp. 145–146)?

While it is common to encounter a slug in a house in Guatemala City, Simón was overwhelmed by the unusual amount of slugs that must be creeping in the patio to produce these trails. In order to prevent slugs in domestic spaces, it is common to sprinkle salt on the floor, or, in the case of a direct encounter, to sprinkle it on the animal, causing a rather cruel death by dehydration. Hence, despite being used to the diverse coping mechanisms people developed in the aftermath of the civil war, Daniela's practice of homemaking initially seemed quite unsettling to him. Daniela explained that after witnessing and experiencing a high amount of violence throughout her life, she decided to renounce any form of violence. This includes a firm refusal to evict insects and molluscs from her home. I understand this as a radical form of ethics that challenges openly normative modes of homemaking and intimacy.

Acknowledging the structuring power of empire in authorizing (or preventing) and shaping interpersonal as well as human-nonhuman relations, I approach empire relationally and from the intimate level. As 'intimate lives absorb and repel the rhetoric, laws, ethics, and ideologies of the hegemonic public sphere, but also personalize the effects of the public', the intimate level allows to off-centre empire by moving beyond its geographic and political-economic implications (Berlant 1998, p. 282). Following the foundational work of Ann L. Stoler on 'the affective grid of colonial politics', the intimate level is not simply a supplementary lens for the analysis of empire (Stoler 2002, p. 7). Instead, the intimate level was constitutive to the emergence, management, and expansion of empires, as 'modes of intimacy, and their material anchors emerged from European Empire as a mode and maneuver of domination and exploitation and continue to operate as such' (Povinelli 2006, pp. 16–17). Extending the analysis of empire and the intimate to human-nonhuman relations, this section explores how multispecies intimacies, as human-nonhuman relations marked by companionship, care and interdependence, upset colonial legacies articulated through speciesism and invasibility.

Emerging as a personal coping mechanism to the conflicts and violence that are rooted in Guatemala's experiences with colonial imperialism, Daniela's practice of multispecies homemaking fosters a humble, yet insistent decolonial approach to human-nonhuman relations. Understanding '[h]ome, as a

place and a process, (…) fraught with the sociospatial politics of multiple, overlapping intimacies both within and across species lines', her decision to enter into companionship with all living beings she encountered in her own home upset anthropocentric logics of speciesist hierarchies and entailed norms of behaviour (McKeithen 2017, p. 132) Hence, it is in these slowly drawn slug trails that the structuring and ordering power of colonial and imperial formations pervading the intimate spaces of home and relations are off-centred and thwarted. An intimate, quasi-therapeutic relation of care and interdependence evolved between Daniela and the slugs, turning each other into one's agent for survival (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). This is particularly the case for relations with species like slugs that, based on their misconception as ugly, invasive and without a clear ecological 'relevance', are usually excluded from spaces of intimate domesticity. Amidst the potentially life-threatening limitations and violence arising from both speciesism and patriarchy, Daniela-with-slugs coproduce a home and living arrangement based on 'vinculariadad/ interdependence'. Hence, Daniela is far from being 'single' or 'living alone', as the official language of marital status would define her. Instead her life is embedded into dense webs of relations of care, companionship and 'response-abilities' with both humans and nonhumans in her home and beyond (Haraway 2016, p. 2).

However, despite their emancipatory potential, these practices may also be read in more ambiguous terms. While Daniela and the slugs evolved into each other's agent for survival in the intimate spaces of home, once exposed to a more public setting these practices could potentially be appropriated and instrumentalized for hegemonic purposes. While the emphasis of this article remains on highlighting the emancipatory potential of multispecies intimacies, it is simply important to be aware that the open-ended nature of these practices also holds a certain vulnerability.

For example, as it has been argued, in the Anthropocene a new web of relations among all living beings is required based on companionship, care and interdependence. Simultaneously, the closer physical proximity between humans and nonhumans due to disturbed environments and habitat destruction as well as the decreasing biodiversity resulting from extinction seem to fuel the spread of zoonotic diseases (Vidal 2020). Some might misinterpret this correlation as evidence to uphold an anthropocentric, colonial belief system based on speciesist hierarchies. Does it not confirm the need for humans to regulate and control nature? Does it not imply the superiority of speciesism, in which humans and nonhumans keep a 'proper distance' both physical and ethical? In this context also the kinship between speciesism and racism becomes quite evident, for example when the spread of a zoonotic disease is blamed on a specific group of people for e.g. their eating habits and relations to animals. Multispecies intimacies as a concept and practice then appear idealistic at best and dangerous at worst.

However, it is clear that upholding colonial legacies in form of speciesism will not help addressing problems that arose from colonial imperialism in the first place. Quite the opposite is required. Fostering human-nonhuman relations based on companionship, care and interdependence does not mean to simply address then habitat destruction and extinction. In the past this relation has often left the nature-culture divide intact by portraying humans as nature's rescuer (Uggla 2010). It goes beyond this by recognizing 'increasingly visible connections between the wellbeing of humans, other living things and entire ecosystems' (Vidal 2020) and then acknowledging the needs and rights of all nonhuman and more-than-human beings alongside to those of humans. An example for this could be the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (*Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra*) passed in Bolivia in 2010, in which Mother Earth as a complex life system is a legal personality with rights. Hence, the notion of multispecies intimacies invites to examine and imagine human-nonhuman relations by taking their mutual entanglements and embeddedness as starting point.

Entanglements against empire: on nonhuman agency in wasteland recovery

The last section of the article expands on processes of imperial ruination and recovery through off-centring anthropocentric narratives. I do so to argue that the nonhuman agency opens up pathways towards more meaningful, sustainable measures in wasteland recovery during the Anthropocene. Away from the intimate, urban, and domestic setting of postcolonial, post-war Guatemala, this section moves to the heart of a former imperial power, tracing the recovery of a wasteland in the peripheral South of Vienna. Attending to multispecies entanglements is key here to understand the wasteland's transformation from being perceived as economically and aesthetically worthless to a natural monument. Off-centring anthropocentric narratives in landscape restoration and development by turning towards nonhuman agency also offers an important intervention in the Anthropocene. Environmental degradation and the creation of wasteland in conjunction with colonial imperialism intensifies as the Anthropocene progresses, spurred by harmful industries and more extreme weather events. As it has been argued throughout the article, human conservation efforts often implicate and reproduce colonial legacies through a focus on 'flagship species', invasibility, and nostalgic imaginaries of 'nature'. Hence, to acknowledge multi-species entanglements as crucial in the recovery of imperial ruination offers an important, off-centre challenge to colonial logics of human agency.

Since Vienna's time as a Roman settlement, the *Wienerberg* mountain ridge was known for its rich clay deposits. In 1819, Alois Miesbach started renting a small brickyard in the South of Vienna, which was founded in 1775 under the

rule of Maria Theresa for the Habsburg military to maintain the city's fortifications (*k.k. Fortifikationsziegelöfen*). Over the course of a few decades, Alois Miesbach and his nephew Heinrich Drasche turned the *Wienerberger* brick company into Europe's largest brick producer. With the fall of the Habsburg Empire following World War I, the clay brickwork industry entered a critical phase from which it never recovered. Despite brief periods of reversal during the interwar period and post-war reconstruction in the 1950s, the decreasing profitability of clay extraction and replacement of clay bricks with cement in the construction sector eventually led to the closure of Vienna's brickworks in the 1960s. The *Wienerberger* company, which then focused on the expansion of their business within Austria and, beginning in the 1980s, internationally, turned into a multinational enterprise that remains the world's largest clay brick producer.

The arduous work of brick production at the *Wienerberger* clay pits was borne by migrant workers in quasi-serfdom. Referred to as *Ziegelböhm,* these impoverished farmers, who migrated from the regions of Bohemia and Moravia, made up the main part of the brickworks labour force. The environment in which they worked was shaped by industrial infrastructure. The clay deposits were supported by infrastructures that facilitated the energy-intense process of brick burning. These included Drasche's investments in coal mining, as well as the construction of the *Wiener Neustadt* Canal for the shipping of wood from the Vienna Woods (*Wienerwald*). In relation to the tourist crowds marvelling at the well-preserved monumental buildings in the historic city centre of Vienna today, those (hi)stories of labour migrations, harsh social and working conditions and their environmental impact compressed in each of their bricks are successfully obscured by the 'feel-good' narratives on Vienna's heavily commodified imperial past (Schorske 1981, Maderthaner and Musner 1999).

After the fall of the Habsburg monarchy, the soil in the former sites of clay excavation was seen as economically useless, especially after test drillings for oil and gas in 1934–1936 and 1969 proved largely unproductive. The wasteland of deserted factory ruins and vast areas of extracted land was cracked with deep clay pits. The numerous pits varied in depth from a few metres to up to thirty, and partially filled up with precipitation and groundwater. Such conditions made the area unsuitable for construction. Perceived as aesthetically unappealing, this landscape of terrestrial wounds and scars soon invited the formation of dumping sites in some of the pits. The legacies of pollution following the contamination of the soil with debris from the destruction of World War II, household waste, slag and excavation material still linger on, partially in the form of discharging landfill gas (Umweltbundesamt Wien, Umweltgut Wien).

The abandoned landscape became temporarily re-appropriated for human leisure activities – ranging from children roaming around in the ruins to

motorbike races as well as swimming in the ponds that emerged in the clay pits. The Bohemian aristocrat Alexander Joseph 'Sascha' Count Kolowrat-Krakowsky, founder of Vienna's first major film studio 'Sascha Films', found inspiration in this landscape for his film projects. In the context of the developing genre of epic films and the Egyptomania of the 1920s (spurred by the excavation of Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb), Vienna's clay pits seemed to offer a perfect setting. In 1922, Sascha-Film produced the film *Queen of Sin and the Spectacle of Sodom and Gomorrah* (*Sodom und Gomorrha*) by Michael Curtiz, who would later go on to direct *Casablanca*. *Queen of Sin* was followed by *The Moon of Israel* (*Die Sklavenkönigin*) in 1924, based on the biblical story of Exodus. The colossal stage design for the temple of Sodom required an outdoor space, and the ruined landscape of the clay pits provided the backdrop for the film's apocalyptic scenes. The thousands of supernumeraries required for the shooting of mass scenes as well as a crew for realizing the stage sets and costumes were mainly recruited from the neighbourhoods adjacent to the film set, where most of the *Ziegelböhm* families lived.

While the films are remembered for their absurd opulence and fantastical imagination, a closer look at the plot, underlying narratives as well as scenery design, suggest how they were profoundly grounded in their temporal and spatial context. For example, infused with Orientalist imagination that framed the cinematic image of exoticized Ancient Egypt, the silhouettes of three palm trees – 'foreign', 'exotic' plants – were deemed sufficient to turn the clearly recognizable Viennese clay pit landscape into an Egyptian desert. Scenes of brick production for the construction of a temple must have felt like a form of re-enactment for some of the supernumeraries. Engaging with themes of siege, invasion, and biblical apocalypse, 'Sascha' did not choose the ruined landscape for its potential for life and recovery. Rather, the clay pits were valued as a seeming reflection of suffering, apocalypse and decay. Hence, in spite of the attention and exposure that large-scale film productions brought to the area, no sustainable redevelopment or recovery of the wasteland took place.

Simultaneous to this abandonment, a unique biotope for a variety of species emerged almost unnoticed in the ruins of the imperial brickwork industry. The new species benefitted from the seasonal flooding and drying-up of the ponds, as well as the specific chemical composition of the clay soil (Eder 1999, p. 6) The abandonment of a ruined landscape by humans often proves to be an effective remedy in terms of ecological recovery (Gandy 2013, Hoag *et al*. 2018, Zani 2018). In fact, extinction in the Anthropocene is closely related to the disappearance of seasonally transforming, transitional landscapes. Therefore, diversity in landscapes is key for biodiversity in nonhuman animal species (Tews *et al*. 2004).

In the 1970s, environmentalists and natural scientists were increasingly recognizing and drawing attention to the distinctiveness and irreplaceability of this 'clay pit landscape' (*Ziegelgrubenlandschaft*). The area came to be

regarded as endangered due to increasing building activity (Schagerl *et al*. 2007, p. 4). A case in point are the individual rare algal assemblages found in each of the 44 ponds left. The comparatively high levels of salinity and sulphate concentration in the water caused by the clay soil allows for the thriving of algae species that cannot be found anywhere else in Austria. These include the mass occurrence of the dinoflagellate *Perdiniopsis borgei* (Schagerl *et al*. 2007, p. 53). Eventually, in the 1970s, the Municipality for Forestry and Farming became responsible for the remaining fields. Between 1983 and 1995, the municipality re-designed the area for retreat and recreation, according to the plans of landscape architect Wilfried Kirchner. Kirchner's designs were based on plants (and animals) considered 'domestic'. The space rapidly evolved to host a new habitat for a variety of animal and plant species so much so that in 1995 some 90 hectares became protected as natural monument (*Naturdenkmal*). In a different part of the former fields for clay extraction, a thermal spa centre and a park were opened, supplied by a sulphur spring that was found during earlier unsuccessful drillings for oil and gas.

Recounting the transformation of this former imperial wasteland into a natural monument offers important insights into the role of nonhuman agency in post-industrial recovery processes. As shown, human interventions were not directed towards restoring life in the ruined landscape, potentially deterred by the depth of destruction. Instead, human plans focused on possibilities of further extraction before the site was eventually abandoned. It was indeed nonhuman agency and multispecies entanglements that turned the remnants of empire into the components for a new ecosystem, opening up possibilities for recovery and life in a wasteland humans deemed worthless.

Stories narrating how lives and livelihoods emerge from ruins through multispecies collaborations offer important lessons in the Anthropocene, in which narratives of dystopian futures abound. Recent research on the recovery of wastelands through multispecies collaborations constitute an important contribution in this regard (Tsing 2015, Hoag *et al*. 2018). Instead of further cultivating unproductive states of either false hope, panic or indifference, a turn to multispecies entanglements and *vincularidad*/ interdependence provides an alternative perspective for navigating the Anthropocene. In the previous sections, I have outlined how colonial heritage shapes which life forms are deemed worthy, and demonstrated the potential of vincularidad in recovery. In doing so, I argue that interdependence re-centres life in all its forms, off-centring the colonial practice of ranking lives according to speciesist, racialized, gendered logics.

Conclusion

In this paper I argue for the importance to off-centre empire in the Anthropocene by examining human-nonhuman relations. Firstly, I explore how imperial

methods of collecting, preserving and displaying species impacted species perception both aesthetically and in terms of the cultural and ecological relevance granted to the species. In particular, I discuss how empire instrumentalizes *invasibility,* a characteristic applied to both human and nonhuman animals, to further consolidate its 'natural' borders and legitimize its claim to power by controlling and sanctioning the mobility of specific population groups. Making explicit how species' perception, including invasibility, is far from 'natural', but rather it emerges from historical processes is crucial in the Anthropocene. Today the loss of biodiversity is a major concern, and invasive species are seen as crucial drivers of this development. Moreover, the unsettling effects of environmental degradation and changing climate zones result in increased migration of human and nonhuman animals and plants alike. Hence, examining how imperial legacies figure in human-nonhuman relations in the Anthropocene has the potential to debunk adopted strategies that are misdirected or harmful in areas of species conservation, landscape restoration and migration policies.

Secondly, examining human-nonhuman relations allows not only to trace imperial legacies, but also to challenge them. Hence, I off-centre empire by moving beyond analysing its geographic and political-economic structures to the intimate level, which was constitutive to the emergence, management, and expansion of empires. The case I present suggests that practices of multispecies homemaking have the potential to challenge colonial legacies articulated through speciesism and invasibility from the intimacy of the domestic sphere. Drawing on ethnographic material, I trace how the radical ethics of a woman in Guatemala City upset the imposed speciesist hierarchies of colonialism by making home with species usually considered invasive and therefore excluded in (hetero)normative modes of intimacy and domesticity. I argue that challenging these anthropocentric logics of speciesist hierarchies and entailed norms of behaviour by fostering multispecies intimacies, understood as human-nonhuman relations marked by companionship, care and interdependence, is an essential strategy for navigating the Anthropocene. However, as powerful as the potential of practices like multispecies homemaking may be in subverting legacies of colonial imperialism, they are also vulnerable to be appropriated by hegemonic forces. Continued research on these questions would therefore be immensely helpful to further evaluate the potential of practices like multispecies homemaking to challenge colonial legacies.

Thirdly, moving from the domestic sphere to the landscape level, I argue for the importance of recognizing and re-centring nonhuman agency in order to effectively off-centre empire in the Anthropocene. For this, I turned to the theme of wasteland recovery, which is of high interest in the Anthropocene due to the increase in industrial wasteland and environmental degradation, spurred by harmful industries and more extreme weather events. As the article argues, human-led conservation efforts often implicate and reproduce

colonial legacies and therefore employ misdirected and harmful approaches. Hence, off-centring anthropocentric narratives in landscape restoration and development by turning towards nonhuman agency and multispecies entanglements likewise offers an important intervention in the context of the Anthropocene. The case I present deals with the remarkable transformation of a former imperial wasteland in Vienna's peripheral South that recovered from being a site of extraction, ruination, pollution and abandonment towards being recognized as a unique, diverse biotope and a natural monument. Turning the remnants of empire into the components for a new ecosystem, nonhuman agency and multispecies entanglements opened up possibilities for recovery and life in a wasteland humans deemed economically and aesthetically worthless. Stories narrating how lives and livelihoods emerge from ruins through multispecies collaborations offer important lessons in the present moment, in which narratives of dystopian futures abound. Wasteland recovery co-created with nonhuman animals and plants opens up pathways towards more meaningful, sustainable measures in the Anthropocene.

Notes

1. But the term Anthropocene and its exact temporal limit has been subject to substantial debate and criticism (e.g. Todd 2015). In this article the term Anthropocene will be used only for reasons of practicality, as for now it is more established than its (more suitable) alternatives. In order to address the term's anthropocentrism, universalism and lack of sufficient consideration of the devastating effects of colonial imperialism and racism, alternative terms have been proposed, e.g. the Capitalocene and the Plantationocene (Moore 2015, Haraway 2015). In this article the colonisation of the Americas and the rise of slavery are understood as key early driving forces marking the beginning of the Anthropocene.
2. All names have been changed for reasons of anonymity.

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