UC Riverside

UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

Studying up after studying down: dilemmas of research on South African conservation professionals

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8d0920ft>

Journal

Critical African Studies, 8(3)

ISSN

2168-1392

Author

Fay, D

Publication Date

2016-09-01

DOI

10.1080/21681392.2016.1245106

Peer reviewed

Studying up after studying down: Dilemmas of research on South African conservation professionals

Fay Derick

This is an original manuscript / preprint of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Critical African Studies on 26 Oct 2016,
available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21681392.2016.1245106>

Studying up after studying down: Dilemmas of research on South African conservation professionals

Fay Derick

Abstract

“Studying up” after one has “studied down” poses a unique set of challenges, heightened by contexts of unequal power relations between different sets of informants. These are illustrated with the author’s experience moving from ethnographic fieldwork in a community adjoining a protected area to preliminary explorations of fieldwork among conservation professionals. Because of the intrinsically personal nature of ethnographic research, aspects of social position, personal history, and reflexive self-monitoring shape these encounters, which—depending upon the situations—result in informal restrictions on access, collaboration and an interest in the “expert” anthropologist, and attempts to shift the loyalties of the anthropologist. While the details of the encounters are specific to the particular cases described, they highlight issues that are endemic to the fraught terrain of conservation in contemporary Africa, and which are likely to confront other researchers who attempt a similar transition from working with a disadvantaged population to working with the officials who would govern and regulate them.

Keywords

conservation, reflexivity, positionality, studying up, south africa

Introduction

The project of “studying up” has forced anthropology to confront issues of reflexivity and positionality. This literature has generally operated on the implicit premise that “studying up” entails a new project—a dissertation project, or a later-career study by an anthropologist in their “own” society. In this essay, I engage a different situation, asking how the process of “studying up” might differ when it follows a process of “studying down.” I engage in what Nader refers to as “self-analysis” (1972, 24), discussing my own research trajectory, and the challenges that are thrown up by my own positioning and the positioning of various sets of informants and collaborators. The experiences I describe here emerged from preliminary and exploratory efforts towards beginning a new project, one that follows and partly builds upon my earlier work doing what might be considered “studying down.” The essay thus highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with moving from “conventional” ethnography—situated in a rural

African community—to studying a population of professionals, officials, elites who are engaged with that community.

This transition brings a particular set of dilemmas: how can an anthropologist move across the lines between communities and the experts who aim to govern them? These are potentially particularly acute in a South African context which juxtaposes the kinds of rural communities conventionally (or historically) studied by Africanist anthropology with substantial educated, professional populations, along lines that often overlap with historically produced inequalities. In principle, as an anthropologist embarking on a new study (as we tell our students in our introductory lectures on fieldwork), one should be open to a range of actors' perspectives, set aside one's assumptions and preconceptions, etc. As Werbner puts it in the passage cited in the introduction to this collection, we ought to aim to “bring to elites...the same empathy and insight that anthropologists bring to the rest of the people they study” (2004, 8). In a context where the new research population includes officials and others with power over one's former informants, however, this proves more challenging: the possibility of studying elites, the perspectives one brings to them, and the perspectives they bring to the anthropologist are all conditioned by prior experiences, expectations and loyalties.

The history of exclusionary conservation in South Africa further complicates the situation. Conservation elites are themselves differentially positioned in relation to communities affected by conservation. On one hand, advocates of exclusionary, “back to the barriers” (Hutton et al. 2005) approaches often emphasize the primacy of conservation goals, at times resting on views of nature and wilderness as excluding people altogether, and opposing any utilization of resources in protected spaces. On the other hand, officials and activists more sympathetic to “rights-based” approaches (e.g. Campese et al. 2009), often under the banner of “people and parks” (e.g. DEA 2016) frequently advocate policies such as co-management, community-based natural resource management, land restitution involving protected areas, etc. These positions partly overlap with different generations of conservation professionals, and partly overlap with race and the differing patterns of socialization and training that have accompanied racial segregation in South Africa. Many white South Africans are deeply invested in national parks and their relation to natural heritage (see e.g. Carruthers 1995, Green 2014), and express anxieties that transition to majority rule is undermining hard-fought battles to protect nature, while black South Africans may be more sympathetic to the plight of communities dispossessed or disadvantaged through conservation, even as institutional constraints may limit the possibility of acting on these positions (Maguranyanga 2009). These boundaries also overlap with professional trajectories and differences in the history and approaches of conservation agencies in South Africa and their respective institutional commitments to and experience with rural communities on the margins of protected areas. These positions are not absolute by any means; they are shaped by institutional structures and mandates, and individuals may move across these boundaries over the course of their careers and experiences.

Engaging conservation elites requires a negotiation of one's position in these ongoing debates. While the ethnography of conservation in South Africa (and beyond) has gradually taken up West et al.'s call for attention to conservation scientists, officials and other professionals (West et al. 2006, 265), this work has not directly confronted the challenges of studying up after studying down. The existing literature primarily consists of works that began as theses or dissertations (e.g. Büscher 2013, Garland 2008, Goloff 2015, Maguranyanga 2009, Nyambe 2005), in which the ethnographer could undertake fieldwork without being positioned by prior engagements with these elites and conservation-affected communities. In some cases the authors explicitly attempted to maintain positions of neutrality:

Occasionally, respondents sought [my] personal opinions on conservation. Under such circumstances, I always endeavoured to politely indicate that I preferred to hear their opinions as opposed to offering mine (Nyambe 2005: 85, cf. Maguranyanga 2009: 198).

Or envisioned their work as non-partisan, “of use for many people and groups” (Goloff 2015: 10). In contrast, given my intention at the time of the work discussed in this paper to include my earlier field site (around Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve) in a new project examining tensions between biodiversity conservation, “rights-based conservation” and neoliberalization, claiming a position of neutrality was not a ready option; rather, my history of prior engagement and commitments shaped the ethnographic encounters.

I have found it helpful to think through the challenges I describe by drawing loosely upon reference group theory, which draws attention to the way that positionality is not only a product of how one is positioned, but also how one conceives oneself and one's actions. Recognizing positioning by others is fairly straight-forward: the anthropologist who has “studied down” may be identified and known to be part of particular networks and have particular sympathies. Without discounting the importance of these relations, I would highlight the way reference group theory points to the more subjective side of positioning: the anthropologist can also be expected (I certainly did) to reflect on how one's past informants might evaluate one's actions and positions. The behavior and reasoning of social actors—not least the anthropologist—is shaped not only by external evaluation, but by self-evaluation in terms of imagined (and occasionally present) audiences of peers of different kinds, with the recognition that the group with whom one interacts most regularly on a day-to-day basis may not be the group to whom one is primarily oriented (Merton 1968, cf. Hefner 1990, 238-242). I would suggest that this allows for a more nuanced and contextually sensitive reading of position than “socially defined identity categories” (Agrawal 2005, 174) of race, gender, ethnicity, etc., which in practice do not necessarily correspond to clear-cut stances in conservation debates (cf. Maguranyanga 2009). Without diminishing their importance in any way, we must recognize that they are inflected by and intersecting with aspects of professional training, biography, institutional positioning, etc. that may be more salient in particular encounters and social situations.

From Rural Communities to Conservation Professionals

My earlier work has meant that I already have loyalties and experiences that complicate a transition to “studying up” among conservation professionals. I have conducted fieldwork intermittently since 1998 in Hobeni, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, adjoining Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve, a Xhosa-speaking community which was involved in a successful land restitution claim on the reserve in 2001. My initial access to the community in 1998 was very explicitly contingent on supporting the community in the land claim efforts; I was vetted by NGO and community leaders, and over the space of many formal meetings and informal conversations, I came to share many of their perspectives on the injustices of the implementation of conservation in the past and the complicated politics of conservation authorities’ relations to tourism operators and traditional authorities (chiefs and headmen). In many ways the Dwesa-Cwebe land claim leadership has been a reference group in my encounters with conservation professionals; I weigh my positions against the aspirations and arguments of the Dwesa-Cwebe leaders and local residents with whom I stayed, and conversely my history of involvement in the area potentially situates me in the view of past and present conservation authorities. In the pages that follow, I examine a series of fieldwork encounters that highlight some of the issues associated with shifting from studying a rural community to studying those who might govern or administer it.

The first example comes from before I had formulated the new project; it involves meeting a conservation professional, Mr. Maduna,¹ whom I had known in my earlier fieldwork, but who had since taken up a different position. The individual in question had been the reserve manager at Dwesa-Cwebe in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and had subsequently moved on to another reserve within the Eastern Cape Parks network.² I had been away from South Africa from 2005-2009, and was aiming to reactivate old contacts to understand changes in the politics around Dwesa-Cwebe since my last visit. The primary issue I encountered here is a familiar one from the literature on studying up, the problem of access (Nader 1972), compounded by the way I seemed to be positioned by my interlocutor.

Mr. Maduna’s relationship with community leadership at Dwesa-Cwebe had become tense by the late 1990s; they complained that he had broken a promise to restore seasonal access to forest products, and he had refused a number of appeals by community leaders and sympathetic researchers³ to restore access to community members.⁴ Local residents and NGO staff involved in the negotiations speculated that one reason he hadn’t opened the reserve to local utilization was because he wanted to protect his reputation for running a tightly disciplined reserve. His frame of reference, they suggested, was the hierarchy of conservation professionals, not the people directly involved in the Dwesa-Cwebe negotiations. While their encounters generally remained cordial there was an undercurrent of distrust and frustration. This was compounded by the fact that although he was Xhosa-speaking he was not from the area. This is a fairly common

practice in conservation and park management - agencies avoid hiring local people to avoid conflicts of interest and to minimize existing ties between managers and communities that may undermine the work of conservation.

Given this history, I was somewhat surprised but pleased when he was quite enthusiastic about meeting when we spoke on the phone. We met a few days later in the conference room adjoining his office by the entrance to the reserve; Mr. Maduna was sharply dressed in his field uniform, and the table was laid out with maps of the reserve and charts of the schedules of reserve staff, together presenting the trappings of authority and a material setting that conveyed his busyness. In our meeting, he was, as I put it to a colleague afterwards, “extremely friendly and cordial, and completely unhelpful,” telling me (it seemed quite genuinely) how surprised he was to see me again, but also politely refusing to engage in a conversation about Dwesa-Cwebe. He deflected all of my questions, explaining that “I don’t want to confuse, I don’t want to lie,” emphasizing that he had been away from Dwesa-Cwebe for three years, and referring me to the current reserve manager. He briefly mentioned that in his understanding, the “issue was still fencing and benefits to the community,” but he clearly wasn’t willing or interested in talking about his work at Dwesa-Cwebe. Instead he emphasized how busy he was with his new work at a different nature reserve, but also offered to take me around at some point to see some “real” indigenous forest.

Some aspects of this encounter reflect familiar issues from the literatures on studying up. Professionals are busy, concerned with protecting both their reputations and their institutions, e.g. by not commenting on matters outside of current areas of responsibility. This situation was compounded by a personal history and positioning: he knew from our many encounters over my earlier fieldwork that I had close ties and sympathies with local leaders who were antagonistic to the policies he had maintained, and that I had a history of arguing for consideration of local utilization of forest resources. At least in relation to Dwesa-Cwebe, this history would preclude my ability to engage him as an informant, though he did hold out the possibility of some conversations about presumably less controversial settings elsewhere.

The second encounter I describe took place three days later. I arranged a meeting at the Parks Board headquarters with Mr. Ntombela,⁵ the Community Relations Manager of the Parks Board. Coming so soon after the previous meeting, this encounter made it clear that my history could have very different effects: rather than being viewed (apparently) as part of the networks that were aligned with communities against the reserve management, in this context I was engaged as an expert on the communities with which the Parks Board was trying to build relationships.

In our conversation, it became very clear that Mr. Ntombela was very understanding of, and interested in, the social sciences. He had written a Master’s Thesis in Development Studies, and at one point in our conversation, he described his own position as being caught in “the double-bind of serving both people and parks [while] wanting to be unambiguously pro-development.”

At the time, he was the only person in the Eastern Cape Parks Board assigned full-time to “people and parks” and community relations issues, with a portfolio of more than a dozen protected areas. This position meant that in practice, he could find himself advocating for communities and development within the organization against those with less interest in people and more interest in biodiversity conservation. In the language of reference group theory, for the Community Relations manager, I and other researchers provided an alternative reference group to his more hard-line conservation colleagues.

My history of work around Dwesa-Cwebe also made me a source of information on community relations that were not captured in the institutional history and memory of his organization. In the years following our initial meeting, until his departure from the organization in 2013, we had a series of email exchanges and meetings in which we discussed the history of negotiations that took place between 1998-2003, before he was on the scene, proposals for co-management, local politics, etc. In these conversations, Mr. Ntombela expressed his frustration that he didn’t know all of this history. At the same time, this relationship posed a relatively easy situation for me with reference to my earlier fieldwork; I could advocate for the interests and policies expressed by Dwesa-Cwebe leadership, with an interlocutor who was both personally sympathetic and in a position that allowed him to engage with my knowledge and recommendations.

Critics have noted that the vertical metaphor in the notion of “studying up” may not accurately or sufficiently represent the relations involved; this is certainly the case for the complex positionalities of conservation professionals in Africa, for whom “up” may be a “fragile or contingent status” (editors’ introduction), in which individuals may be “positionally superior or inferior” (editors’ introduction, 5). “Up” as opposed to “down” implies some kind of advantage or superiority in power, knowledge, wealth, authority, etc. My conversation with the reserve manager Mr. Maduna might fit this framing: he is clearly “up” in the sense of holding a managerial role within the Parks Board and authority over the park where he is employed. In addition, most of our prior encounters had come in contexts where I was accompanying community leaders for whom he was an authority figure — however contested that authority was — with the potential to make and enforce regulations, set work schedules, etc.

The case of Mr. Ntombela, the Community Relations manager, is more complicated. He was “up” relative to Dwesa-Cwebe residents in the sense of being a professional and part of the state conservation organization that managed the reserve, but within this organization he was certainly not in charge, and often found himself advocating unpopular positions. To borrow Bourdieu’s language, he might be seen as part of “a dominated fraction of a dominant class” (Bourdieu 1984, 229; cf. Ortner 2010, 227), part of an organization with authority over conservation in relation to the rural populations affected by protected areas, but in a relatively disadvantaged position.⁶ This positioning meant that academic contacts provided an extended network, sympathetic to the projects of integrating conservation and development, championing

community interests, and providing external validation, or at least support, for positions that might be challenged within his own organization.

Faced with the challenging position of being based in the head office of an organization while having responsibility for understanding community dynamics at dozens of protected areas in the Eastern Cape, Mr. Ntombela also expressed a certain envy of the ways that academic researchers working in the areas under his purview were privileged in terms of having the time and the resources to do the research that he would have liked to do. Likewise, he was acutely aware that his positioning in an organization that was “above” rural people could also be a liability for the work he aimed to do. He explained the challenges of trying to understand community dynamics while being part of the conservation authority. In his analysis, his affiliation with the Parks Board could be an obstacle to doing research intended to strengthen community claims; he explained that if you go in asking about natural resources, “people assume that because you’re with Parks Board that you’re aiming to restrict them—when really you’re trying to document their usage” to make a case to preserve it. Again, status as “up” or “down” is not only a matter of institutional position, but a matter of the frame of reference through which actors view their position. In the case of the Community Relations manager, his professional affiliation might make him appear to be “above” rural communities, but in his self-assessment, he was also at a disadvantage, both in terms of the criteria of his academic reference group, and in terms of his ability to carry on aspects of his work.

In each of these encounters, I was positioned as someone who had a history of engagement and support for community claims at Dwesa-Cwebe. For the former manager at Dwesa-Cwebe, my position made me potentially problematic and he politely but effectively limited my ability to ask him about his earlier post, presenting himself as a professional whose primary loyalties were to the preservation of indigenous forests. For the Community Relations manager, my position instead made me a potential ally within the organization and a source of information; in a position that embodied the potentially contradictory mandates of contemporary conservation, he seemed to welcome an external colleague who might help to advance the cause of “people and parks” within his organization. In neither case could I “study up” from the position of an unmarked “outsider.”. Instead, both my and my interlocutors’ history with the Dwesa-Cwebe communities shaped our encounters.

Studying Up as an Expert Witness

The third case I examine here again focuses on the ways my earlier fieldwork around Dwesa-Cwebe positioned me in later encounters, in this case as an expert witness in a criminal court case.⁷ On one hand, this status explicitly positioned me as an advocate for community members; on the other hand, it revealed how a shared frame of reference with one’s elite interlocutors may be a challenge, rather than an asset (*contra* Ortner 2010).

In September 2010, David Gongqose, a longstanding friend of mine in Hobeni, one of the Dwesa-Cwebe community, was arrested with two others, with fishing rods, inside the Nature Reserve. Through contacts with the Transkei Land Service Organization (Tralso) that had long worked in the area, the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), a public interest law firm with roots going back to early days of anti-apartheid struggle, decided to take up his defense. The strategy was to argue that David was exercising a right established under customary law—which has been recognized as a source of law in South Africa’s 1996 constitution and subsequent jurisprudence—and the declaration of the Dwesa-Cwebe Marine Protected Area (MPA) did not take into account existing customary law fishing rights and was potentially unconstitutional.⁸

The parties to the trial brought in three expert witnesses: for the defense these were me and Jackie Sunde, a PhD student in the Environmental Evaluation Unit at the University of Cape Town (UCT); for the state, Peter Fielding, a consultant with a PhD in Marine Sciences from UCT, in aggravation (i.e. providing testimony in favor of the harshest penalty possible under the law). In March 2012 we went to trial in the Magistrate’s Court in Elliotdale. The outcome was that the Magistrate convicted the accused but suspended the sentence, and the case is currently (as of June 2016) pending before the Supreme Court of Appeal.⁹

The transcripts of the case run some 600 pages, but I want to highlight one particular exchange, because it epitomizes experiences and arguments that have come up repeatedly in other interactions with marine conservation professionals and advocates, and the way these experiences and arguments intersect with issues around positionality. I focus here on a moment where the prosecution aimed to shift my frame of reference away from the Dwesa-Cwebe communities and the accused, and which reveals more general tensions around studying conservation elites.

Accounts of “studying up” typically treat common experiences as a source of rapport and potential cooperation; Ortner, for example, comments that the possibility of “cooperation is magnified when the people being studied have the same kinds of educational background as the anthropologist, the same kinds of cultural and material resources, and particularly, when they are working in the same general cultural zone as ourselves” (2010, 223). This potential may be an asset in contexts of anthropological engagement with science, media, etc. in a social setting where the “knowledge classes” in question have been less clearly identified with practices of domination and exclusion, and/or where the anthropologist typically has no prior identification with those who are dominated or excluded.

In the court proceedings, however, rather than facilitate access or possible “cooperation,” elements of an imagined common background were deployed by the prosecution in an attempt to separate the loyalties of the experts for the defense from the community, through an appeal to broader, and presumptively shared, conservation concerns. The sections of the transcripts that follow come from a point in the trial when I had given evidence on customary land and forest

resource management, levels of poverty in the community, and the land claim negotiations in 1998-1999, describing an earlier time at which it was anticipated that the resolution of the land claim would lead to local access through a system of co-management. This fit into the overall strategy of the LRC's defense, which aimed to establish (among other things) that there existed a body of customary law and practice around resource management, and that the MPA was established without local consultation or participation in the decision-making process.

I was then cross-examined by the state prosecutor, M. Van Druninck (henceforth PROS), who had been brought in for the case from a special anti-poaching unit. Cross-examination is, of course, a highly constrained speech situation, and thus a site in which one can see again how notions of "up" and "down" may be "fragile and contingent" (editors introduction).¹⁰ Seated on the stand, I was unable to speak directly but was only able to reply to the prosecutors' questions; thus the "expertise" which might put me "up" by some criteria was tempered by the inquisitorial institutional structure that granted the prosecutor the power to control the conversation. He opened the cross-examination with an assertion of this power, separating my claims to expertise from the issues apparently at stake in the case, framing it as not relevant¹¹

PROS: "you will agree with me that your evidence is basically — has nothing to do with the marine protected area? Your focus of evidence is on the forestry and the community and that kind of thing?" (122) — and not on marine resources —

AUTHOR: "It is correct, my focus of my research was on the land claim and land" (122)
...

[and a few minutes later]

PROS: "Why it is necessary to have a marine...protected area, have you done any research on that field?"

AUTHOR: "That is not a focus of my research." (130)

Through this exchange, the prosecutor's language aims to establish that there exists an area of scientific expertise separate from the work of social science and inscribes a boundary between natural and social scientists that would reconstitute the authority of marine science as the decisive voice to be heard in this case. Elsewhere in the cross-examination, he would aim to further separate my understanding from the rationale for the creation of the MPA, and to draw me over to expressing broader concerns for conservation:

PROS: "What worries me, and this is what probably should worry you Doctor is they make--maybe I am wrong but they are talking about all kinds of fish, do you see that?"

AUTHOR: "I do..."

PROS: “Mussels, all kinds, there is no differentiation between what they can and cannot do, what types of fish what they can take or not. Do you not think that is a bit of a problem?”

AUTHOR: “It is a potential problem” (124)

PROS: “It is a huge potential problem Doctor, because we have got protected species that cannot be taken out. We have got numbers that you are only allowed to take so many out” (124)

This line of questioning continued, with the prosecutor eventually asking (after several rounds of objections from the defense’s representation) me for my assessment of the report submitted by Peter Fielding:

AUTHOR: “I agree that Dwesa-Cwebe MPA is important for line fish conservation; I disagree with the proposition that...a complete no-take reserve is the only way on which this can be successful [sic] implemented” (132)

On one hand, this exchange continues the attempt to separate my expertise from that of marine scientists, implying that I would be “worried” if I knew more and am perhaps at fault for not knowing more, and not being worried. On the other hand, the prosecutor’s language aims to shift the frame of reference of the listener, positing a possible solidarity and separating the loyalties of the researcher/expert witness from the community. In effect, he offered the suggestion that the accused may have their extreme demands, but “we” conservation-minded people recognize that we need to save these endangered fish, implicitly accepting the authority of marine scientists in the process. (He would go on to use a similar approach even more aggressively in his cross-examination of Jackie Sunde.)

He then suggested that I defer to the marine science expert report in his questions on my assessment of it. My guarded response (above from p. 132) was met with a comment that further moved my statements from the realm of expertise into “opinion”:

PROS: “Alright. And granted Doctor, because you are obviously supposed to have your own opinion and you can criticize other people’s opinion, but like I said it is an opinion so you might change from that but what I am trying to ascertain from you is the importance of a marine protected area, you agree with?”

AUTHOR: “Yes.”

I would highlight here the ways these interactions can be read as attempts to shift the reference group with respect to which I was framing my responses. In my status as anthropologist-ally of the Dwesa-Cwebe land claimants and expert witness on the stand, I was committed to supporting the position of the accused. But with the suggestion “what should probably worry you,” I was

asked to think about the situation not only or primarily in terms of these loyalties, but also in terms of the importance of biodiversity and the authority of marine science, which he had previously pointed out was outside my professional expertise.

While I was unconvinced, I would suggest that the State Prosecutor's questions highlight a potentially broader dilemma. While I would stand by my statement regarding line fish conservation and the feasibility of alternatives to a no-take reserve, my thinking about shellfish and the MPA had been influenced by marine science; my frames of reference *do* include an openness to systematic assessments of resources that are potentially at odds with local accounts. In my prior fieldwork, I had generally avoided engaging the debates over marine resources, partly because I and the community leaders and NGOs with whom I was positioned were busy with the terrestrial land claim, but also because I had read some of the research on shellfish harvesting on the Transkei coast, and I found some merit to the case that mussel populations were in better shape inside the coastal MPAs by comparison to communal areas outside (e.g. Lasiak and Dye 1989).

This incident reveals a particular challenge in working with conservation professionals in contexts of resource contestation. It is well-recognized in "studying up," particularly with members of "knowledge classes" (Ortner 2010, 222) that our informants have competing representations of the world - and are able to object to the anthropologist's representations, whether directly or through counter-claims that have a bearing on our arguments. The problem of how to study elite perspectives where one disagrees with their representations of a situation, or at least the conclusions that should be drawn from them, is perhaps endemic to many efforts at studying up. The fact that one's informants are powerful people who made decisions that effect others' lives has long been a justification for studying up (cf. Nader 1972). But the challenge becomes particularly acute when these representations are used to justify restrictions on the livelihoods of a prior group of informants. As ethnographers, we are our own study instruments, and we do not arrive fresh at the field for each new project without our prior histories, positions, reference groups, and research coming with us. As anthropologists working with conservation professionals and conservation-affected communities, we may be confronted with biological research that presents findings that might challenge the aspirations and desires of our informants in conservation-affected communities, even as we work to document their ethno-ecological knowledge and practices. In this respect, sharing elements of a background with elites, or at least potential sympathies that create the possibility of enrollment, may be a form of liability when transitioning from studying rural African communities to studying the elites who aim to regulate those communities.¹²

Conclusions

As I prepared further proposals to develop the new project, I also wondered at times whether the study would be more feasible by starting anew, working in a context in which I don't have such

strong attachments to one part of the population. The tentative solution I have envisioned in relation to my future fieldwork around the Gonggose trial entails an analytic approach grounded in understandings of knowledge from Science and Technology Studies, which would allow me to consider my own claims as expert witness on the same terms as the other producers of knowledge and truth claims involved in the case, and the networks that render them resistant or open to challenge. I aim to conceptualize the case as a “boundary process,” refining Star and Griesemer’s (1989) notion of a “boundary object” (developed in order to conceptualize collaboration in scientific endeavors), shifting from a focus on a finished object to an unfolding process - at the intersection of many actors’ interests, but uncertain in its direction, and from a focus on cooperation to a situation where many actors have an interest and a role in its production, but where they are also opposed in their visions for the outcome.¹³

On one hand, the details here are highly specific to the cases I describe and my personal history of engagement, and are particularly acute in the contested context of conservation in post-apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, the issues I confront are likely to be shared by any researcher who makes the transition between studying different but unequally connected groups in a highly differentiated society. Whether the transition falls on lines of society vs. state, rural vs. urban, or patients vs. healers, etc. (among the many kinds of differentiation one might find in contemporary Africa), the anthropologist who attempts to study up after studying down (or serially in some other sequence or configuration) will be positioned both externally and in their own loyalties and reflexive monitoring of their actions and words, and will likely experience attempts to shift these positions. Likewise, such an anthropologist may encounter epistemological questions about whether one’s claims about one’s former informants and their environment are more ‘true’ than those of other competing experts. Whether embraced as ‘expert,’ swayed as ‘fellow cosmopolitan,’ or rejected as an interloper or potential threat, the transition to a second project in the same social world presents the researcher with dilemmas and challenges above and beyond the recognized issues around studying up.

References

- Agrawal, Arun. 2005. “Environmentality: Community, Intimate Government, and the Making of Environmental Subjects in Kumaon, India.” *Current Anthropology* 46 (2):161-190.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Büscher, Bram. 2013. *Transforming the Frontier: Peace Parks and the Politics of Neoliberal Conservation in Southern Africa*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Campese, J., Sunderland, T., Greiber, T., and Oviedo, G. 2009. *Rights-based approaches: Exploring issues and opportunities for conservation*. Bogor, Indonesia: Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

- Carruthers, Jane. 1995. *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History*. Durban: University of Natal Press.
- Conley, John M. and O'Barr, William M. 2005. *Just words: Law, language, and power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- DEA (Department of Environmental Affairs). 2016. People and Parks programme. <https://www.environment.gov.za/projectsprogrammes/peopleparks>
- Donovan, James M. 2008. *Legal anthropology: an introduction*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Garland, Elizabeth. 2008. "The Elephant in the Room: Confronting the Colonial Character of Wildlife Conservation in Africa." *African Studies Review*, 51(3): 51-74.
- Goloff, Benjamin. 2015. Toward Liberatory Conservation? Engaging Environmentalities in Cape Town, South Africa. Honors Thesis, Swarthmore College.
- Green, Lesley. 2014. "Ecology, Race, and the Making of Environmental Publics: A Dialogue with Silent Spring in South Africa." *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 1:2.
- Hefner, Robert 1990. *The political economy of mountain Java: an interpretive history*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hutton, J., Adams, W. M., and Murombedzi, J. C. 2005. "Back to the barriers? Changing narratives in biodiversity conservation." *Forum for Development Studies* 32(2): 341-370.
- Lasiak, Teresa and Dye, Arthur. 1989. "The ecology of the brown mussel *Perna perna* in Transkei, southern Africa: implications for the management of a traditional food resource." *Biological Conservation* 47 (4):245-257.
- Maguranyanga, Brian. 2009. "Our Battles Also Changed": Transformation and Black Empowerment in South African National Parks, 1991--2008. PhD diss., University of Michigan.
- Merton, Robert King 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Nader, Laura 1972. "Up the Anthropologist---Perspectives Gained from Studying Up." In *Reinventing Anthropology*, edited by Dell Hymes, 284-311. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Nyambe, Nyamber. 2005. *Organizational Culture and Its Underlying Basic Assumptions as a Determinant of Response to Change: A Case Study of Kwazulu-Natal's Conservation Sector, South Africa*. PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Ortner, Sherry B 2010. "Access: Reflections on studying up in Hollywood." *Ethnography* 11 (2):211--233.
- Star, Susan L. and Griesemer, James .R. 1989. "Institutional ecology 'translations' and boundary objects: Amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39." *Social studies of science*. 19(3): 387-420.
- Werbner, Richard P 2004. *Reasonable radicals and citizenship in Botswana: the public anthropology of Kalanga elites*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- West, Paige, Igoe, James, and Brockington, Daniel. 2006. "Parks and Peoples: The Social Impact of Protected Areas." *Annual Review of Anthropology* (35): 251-277.

¹ A pseudonym.

² The Parks Board had taken over from Eastern Cape Nature Conservation, the earlier conservation authority, in 2005-2006, with a substantial senior staff turnover.

³ Notably Herman Timmermans, with whom I had collaborated at length.

⁴ As Maguranyanga notes, 'de-racialization' or 'Africanization' of park management does not necessarily ensure the 'transformation' of park management practices" (2009: 183).

⁵ Pseudonyms are used for this individual and his job title.

⁶ Bourdieu, of course, develops this distinction with respect to “commerce vs. art” among cultural producers, but one could highlight a similar distinction along the lines of “exclusionary conservation vs. people and parks” approaches in the conservation industry, where the former remains more prestigious, tied to historical practices and popular understandings of conservation.

⁷ I do not use pseudonyms here given that the material is on the public record.

⁸ The history of the Dwesa-Cwebe MPA is overlapping but separate from that of the terrestrial Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve. The MPA was established in 1998, outside of the negotiations over co-management that were going on as part of the land claim, and in 2005, conservation authorities began enforcement of no-take policy in earnest.

⁹ The Magistrate indicated in his written opinion that the MPA declaration might not withstand constitutional scrutiny, but it was outside of his authority to rule on the constitutionality of legislation and administrative actions.

¹⁰ Legal language, and cross-examination in particular, has been one of the classic sites of “studying up” in the USA (Conley and O’Barr 2005; cf. Donovan 2008, 146-149).

¹¹ I say “apparently” here because in the course of the cross-examination the prosecutor effectively conceded the existence of a system of customary regulation of natural resources, one of the points the LRC aimed to establish.

¹² I am particularly grateful to the editors for helping to clarify my thinking around these points.

¹³ The “boundary object” concept developed in a context in actor-network theory in order to facilitate the analysis of heterogeneous situations involving diverse networks of actors; it allows for an account that may decenter any particular actor in favor of attention to the ways that networks of diverse actors and claims articulate, enable and foreclose certain courses of action, and allow certain accounts and versions of reality to become more or less factual and true.