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Prowess and Indigenous Capture: Hinges and Epistemic Propositions in the Prey Lang Forest

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ABSTRACT

In north-central Cambodia, Indigenous minority communities along with the Prey Lang Forest are rapidly transforming market-independent ecologies toward market-dependent existences. Through this transition, maintaining access to resources, to status and to politically advantageous connections remain the 'hinges' around which other epistemic propositions revolve. The prowess required to capture these vital elements of social life directly from the potent forest is not the same as that required in a market-dependent environment. The two worlds of practice are connected in an intimacy that only consumption can create, and as the market eats the forest the stark difference in social organisation emerges as a point of contention on multiple fronts. In this space, 'Indigenous' propositions about 'reality' gain purchase, even as 'Indigenous' economies are at best constrained, but often foreclosed by market relations. This collision prompts new political and economic possibilities and new classifications for contestation. Drawing together ethnographic data and epistemology at the 'ontological turn', this paper investigates two classificatory anomalies: Indigenous capital accumulation and a silent earth.

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Introduction

The market is a potent interlocutor, but it is not potency. Like the market, potency is amoral and indeterminate. It has its own agenda and, with effort, can be harnessed toward other agendas. But potency is life force, earth energy, the assemblage of elements, energies and materials through which things become things. Effectively tapping potency requires prowess, which consists of elaborate systems of ritual and skill that may or may not work at any given time. How one relates to encounters with potency is indeterminate. Potency accommodates many technologies which are in turn supported by various enstoried practices, this is especially recognisable among human communities. The technologies and their supporting stories are elements of prowess. At this historical moment in the Prey Lang Forest of north-central Cambodia, people with living memory of a market-independent existence and all the skills and stories necessary to tap potency in that context are thrust into market-dependent relations. Demanding new skills that

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are supported by different enstoried technologies, the market consumes the potent forest and becomes *the* interlocutor through which resources, status and political security are negotiated. This writing attempts to untangle an ethnographic knot in which former forest activists, Indigenous persons entangled in social relationships with the potent forces of land and water and long-term colleagues of the author,¹ became both subtle and ruthless capitalists at the resource frontier.

Part of what drives this exploration is that during the transition from Indigenous to capitalist livelihoods, the changes to human prowess that require rendering the world mechanical, impersonal and convertible into money, did not change the potent responses expected from sentient-world relations, only the stories told about them. Using the concepts of potency and prowess to excavate the classificatory anomaly of an Indigenous capitalist in a sentient world, I intend to disrupt a few propositions and put forward some others. The propositions in question emerge out of the instabilities that manifest as global 'development' pushes against its potent base. The first adheres in recent calls by academics finally waking up to what colonised people have been saying about themselves and the world (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Nadasdy 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Wright et al. 2020). This set of propositions, called an 'ontological turn' in social science, suggest that sentience and intentional action extends beyond human actors and that sociality, mutual care, respect and kinship are constituent elements of existence in and with the world (Descola 2013; Haraway 2016; Sahlins 2013). Another proposition suggests that sentient-world phenomena do not exist independently of human stories about them (Kleinod, Duile, and Antweiler 2022; Sprenger 2017; Wessing 2017), implying not ironically that non-human sentience depends on sentient humans.

Together these two propositional hinges have spawned a classificatory cacophony that not only distracts from the importance of the discussion at hand but might be silencing it. The discussion is about life. The discussion is about potency and the creation of life that it makes possible. It is also about the desecration of non-human life made possible by mechanical-world ideas, which suggest that consciousness and sentience belong to humans alone and all other things in the world are machine-like organisms. The discussion concerns the possibility of living in a different kind of world. This said, there are some hard lines being drawn along the schism between sentient and mechanical world ideas, described by some as a 'radical incommensurability of modern and nonmodern worlds' (Bessire and Bond 2014, 442), and by others as 'de- and re-Westernization' (Mignolo 2021). The following analysis tangles these two critiques to refute the suggestion of modern and nonmodern incommensurability using Walter Mignolo's concept of a de- and re-linking feedback loop through which social norms are de-linked from dominant ideas at times of social change only to be re-linked through discursive processes. What Mignolo posits as Westernisation is classified here as mechanical-world propositions about the world and critiqued using the concept of potency. The debate about serious invocations of a sentient world that consists of interdependent, interdimensional, cross-cutting kinship relationships is part of a de-move, decolonising knowledge and destabilising the logic that upholds mechanical-world extraction and lineage-based hierarchies. The re-move is visible in serious treatments of sentient-world processes that leave mechanical-world human-centred logics in place in cunning moves of re-cognition, re-framing and assimilation (Povinelli 2002). The intention of this essay is drawing

attention away from the comforts of academic classification and toward potency to put forward a proposition: sentient and mechanical worlds exist together in practice and the fact of one does not negate or obliterate the fact of the other. If potency, rather than human stories about it, is the unit of analysis is a different conversation is possible?

In the current conversation, lines emerge through writing practices and reality claims (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018), and especially through contests over identities, skills and their attendant rights and capacities of access (Ribot and Peluso 2009; United Nations 2008). Attempting to privilege the silenced stories of marginalised persons, ethnographers can be accused of purifying sentient-world realities by omitting reference to the polluting facts of mechanical-world capitalist practices (Bessire and Bond 2014; Nadasdy 2021). In the case of rights of access, state actors might insist that Indigenous claims to ancestral lands can only be exercised by persons engaged exclusively in sentient-world practices (Baird 2013; Hak, McAndrew, and Neef 2018). Along the same lines, evidence of mechanical-world prowess might render the 'radical alterity' of sentient-world realities null (Bessire and Bond 2014, 441). These critiques make it possible to re-frame ritual acts as little more than 'outwitting spirits', and they negate the value of Indigenous management of ancestral lands because 'animists may principally be just as able to deforest a sacred forest' as the Christians denied the opportunity to do so in Indigenous land (Kleinod, Duile, and Antweiler 2022, 127, 160).

All of the above-mentioned classificatory fault lines foreground prowess and ignore potency. The denuded forest and all the sentient-world ramifications of its destruction are the issue, not what people with rights to cut it down think about it or what academics write about it. With this analytic problem in mind, I follow feminist discourses privileging attention to *relations between* things over attention to the things themselves (Haraway 2016; Strathern 1988; Tsing et al. 2017), to suggest a classificatory dyad: Potency and Prowess. The following pages will explore the *relations between* potency and the prowess required to tap it. Engendered through studies of statecraft and power in Southeast Asia (Day 2002; Guillou 2017; Wolters 1999), potency is that which makes all things possible and prowess is the skill required to tap it and enlist it toward particular kinds of projects. I suggest that this dyad of potency and prowess can describe political economies in both sentient and mechanical worlds and can be used to describe all players through time. Viruses and bacteria (Herrera and César 2018; Lowe 2010), kings and councilors (Graeber and Sahlin 2017; Hocart 1936; Mabbett and Chandler 1995), ants, tigers and elephants (Choe 2012; Cuasay 2002; Frolovia 2017), captains of industry, bankers and prime ministers (IDI 2016; Norén-Nilsson 2013; Reuters 2013) are all engaged in various forms of prowess in order to capture potency. I propose that the important element is the dyad. Analytical focus on the relations between the prowess and the potency ensures that the earth cannot be erased from the conversation in favour of its upstart storytellers. It might be that a propositional dyad resists a hinge.

My use of the proposition and the hinge comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein via Elizabeth Povinelli (Povinelli 2016; Wittgenstein 1969). The latter stretches the conceptual use of a propositional hinge beyond the language games of the former and into the reality games of our current era. The principal concept is that some propositions are beyond doubt, and that they become hinges around which other concepts about the world are ordered. Povinelli suggests that the bifurcation of 'Life (*bios*) and Nonlife (*geos*,

meteros)’ is a hinge upon which ‘geontological power’ orders reality (2016, 16). Sentient-World and Mechanical-World are also propositional hinges around which other concepts can be organised. The latter suggests that humans are uniquely historically aware with intentional actions, while all other living things function unconsciously, or habitually like biological machines, and what is called ‘non-life’ (rocks, soil, water) simply exists. The former suggests that thinking, awareness and intentional actions are happening all the time in ways that defy the logic of a bifurcation between life and non-life, human and non-human. Concepts, in turn, are ideas sparked, moulded and kept alive within the iteration between the ordinary and the extraordinary of everyday practice (Das 2020). Veena Das’ attention to the ordinary will anchor the following discussion and help maintain awareness of the constant interplay between material processes and the stories and propositions that grow out of them, between potency and the prowess required to tap it.

Tapping potency is at once necessary and dangerous. My colleagues living in and around Prey Lang have a collection of propositions related to planetary potency and the appropriate methods of tapping it. Transgressions are dangerous and are explained in the register of sociality. For example, failing to ask permission before extraction is a transgression, as are the following: Failing to acknowledge signs and stop extractive activities when necessary, failing to show respect during extraction and failure to share the fruits of extraction [often done through ritual feasting, consistently mistaken for ‘sacrifice’ (see, Work 2022b)]. In the story unpacked here, transgressions are rampant and are marked by some well-known manifestations of dangerous chthonic potency, namely illness, fire and spontaneous communication from trees and rocks. The main point of the paper is that regardless of human stories about potency and prowess, potent responses to transgressive prowess swing on the propositional hinge of the sentient world described by colonised persons. This material manifestation of the capacity to call the exception, chthonic sovereignty (Schmitt 1985; Work 2019), can be obscured by the shaman’s trickery of markets and money (Graeber 1996; Taussig 2003), which can mask the effects of transgressive prowess through wealth accumulation and medical interventions. My colleagues in Prey Lang see this and tell me that the power they describe is real, but the owner of the company (described below) is, ‘in the city, protected by his air conditioner’.²

This paper proceeds to explain the dynamic interplay between potency and prowess, and how these concepts inform propositions about the sentient or mechanical condition of the world. This is followed by an ethnographic vignette to illustrate potency and prowess as they manifest in both sentient and mechanical world realities at the resource frontier where market prowess consumes forest potency. Then there will be a disruption and emplacement of some academic propositions emerging at the ‘ontological turn’. In conclusion, Wittgenstein’s observation that ‘the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing’ (1969, 15e 98) will be brought to bear on the ethnographic data presented below. The data presented support my claim that sentient-world propositions about the behaviour of potency exist amid mechanical-world propositions about the same behaviour. This claim begs further consideration about the relationship between experience and the rules used to order it.

Potency

Potency is life force. Often conflated with prowess, potency is what prowess captures. Its simultaneous erasure and misrecognition in academic productions is an integral part of the ‘propositional hinges’ around which the mechanical version of the world is ordered (Povinelli 2016, 37). Povinelli makes no ontological claims about the world, but points to the epistemological erasures through which scientific classifications render some things ‘life’ and other things ‘non-life’. This might sound natural to readers, even rational. Water, land and minerals do not reproduce, do not metabolise and grow, and are therefore not ‘life’. This logical scientific classification obscures, however, the crucial interaction between intentional prowess (metabolising and growing) and the object of its intention (the raw materials consumed to make metabolising and growing possible). It also erases (in Povinelli’s telling) Austronesian truth claims that manganese rock is the blood of dreamtime ancestors who ‘actively interpret their environments’ (128). It obscures the bacterial origins of their ancestral rock-blood and misrecognises the pervasive role of ancestral rock-blood in biological processes (Povinelli 2016, 43; see also, Alejandro et al. 2020; Andresen, Peiter, and Küpper 2018). Growth, as an ‘active’ series of chemical and mechanical processes performed by plants, animals and bacteria, takes centre stage as ‘life’ while ‘passive’ rock-blood is only the set upon which growth happens. Moreover, the neutral observers of mechanical processes and the classifiers of what is and is not ‘life’ slip into the background, obscuring the *uniquely sentient* human people making claims about reality.³

Benedict Anderson’s classic (1990) description of power in Java reveals embedded mechanical-world propositions that shape his description of Javanese conceptions of power, even as he attempts to do otherwise. From Anderson, we learn that for modern Europeans, power is ‘an abstraction deduced from observed patterns of [human] social interactions’. It is heterogeneous, unlimited, ‘morally ambiguous’ and ‘not inherently legitimate’ (22). ‘Javanese tradition’, on the other hand, posits power to be ‘divine energy which animates the universe ... manifested in every aspect of the natural world’ (22), and in the ‘process of generation and regeneration’ (23). It is ‘neither legitimate nor illegitimate. Power is’ (23). This is potency. In his analysis, however, Anderson is mystified that the Javanese emphasise the ‘problems of concentrating and preserving Power’ and pay little attention to its ‘proper’ uses (28, 22). This is his first slip into mechanical-world thinking with its uniquely sentient humans. In this analysis he misrecognises cosmic energy as a thing to hold, exercise and use, rather than the potency that fuels effective action in the world. The Javanese do not make that mistake and are quite aware that divine energy disperses when not put to ‘proper’ use. Anderson tells us that demons are fuelled by the same power as saints, but demons are prone to self-serving acts and their accumulated power quickly disintegrates (25). The Javanese concern is therefore how to accumulate potency, not how to manage those who have done so, because the potency manages that.

Southeast Asian notions of potency align with the Austronesian concepts described by Povinelli (1995; 2016), and also those from South America (de la Cadena 2015; Taussig 1980), and other parts of Asia (Channa 2020; Gagné 2020). Potency is world-making, elemental and ancestral. Anderson is important here, his interventions about power in Java were a de-Westernising move in political science. He shows how enlightened

understandings of power are not universal and how a different analytical lens helps clarify Indonesian politics. In an important critique, Lorraine Aragon draws out the tension between the potency of ‘ancestral cosmic power’ and its misrecognition as political power centred in hierarchical order (2022, 21–22). Through this move, she catches where Anderson conflates potency and prowess, as if the power of ancient kings absorbed and morphed by ‘modern secular’ leaders was potency. She goes on to show how this is a ‘normative and prescriptive’ frame that perpetuates the erasure of sentient-world propositions in contemporary Indigenous rights discourses (26). Aragon sees ancestral cosmic power animating crafts, arts and farming in ways that empower local politics and promote solidarity. Cosmic power and local politics are also deeply intertwined in Sahlins (2017) presentation of layered political manifestations across time and space that show ‘meta-humans’ (aka, spirits or enstoried energies) animating shamanic prowess, and traces this animating force as it congeals over time and through stories to become a political *thing* wielded by big men, chiefs, priests and kings (see also, Beban and Work 2014; Davis 2016; Work 2022a).

Any given ‘picture of the world’ is less based on concrete facts than it is the product of an ‘inherited background’ that informs designations of truth and falsehood (Wittgenstein 1969, 94). ‘To read of the king’, writes Wolters, ‘is to read of Siva, and vice versa’ and to imagine his ambrosia spreading everywhere, ceaselessly, gloriously (Wolters 1999, 83). The king is Siva, who is Brahma, who floats upon the navel-born lotus flower of Vishnu, who rests on a serpent in the eternal ocean. When my colleagues in Cambodia are forced (usually by me) to explain the potency through which the ‘ancient one’ of the karst landscape communicates, they resolutely refuse to make true claims about it. Some might engage in taxonomic explanations that delineate one kind of energy from another, in which benevolent protection and raw indeterminate power encounters exist on a spectrum that begins deep in the forest where potency is most indeterminate and dangerous and ends in the village where *neak ta* (ancient ones) reside at the Buddhist temple and protect the villagers (often from the raw potency of the forest and more recently from the prowess of the corporations).

In another piece (Work 2019), I argue that what academics (and others) call ‘spirits’ are ‘material and energetic force ... [and] a critical conduit between humans and natural resources’ (76). Invoking Hocart, I further suggest that interdimensional communicative technologies are ‘the science of life’ (1953, 53; Work 2019, 79). To this description, I add the suggestion that the named and historicised figures called ‘spirits’ in contemporary discourse might be productively conceived as ‘enstoried energy’. This is to claim that the exceptionalism of humans be limited to the incredibly powerful potential of storytelling. As a concept in the everyday phenomenal word, this proposition might expose the ‘inherited background’ of stories that continue to situate us in the world. Hocart recognised elaborate ritual systems engaging the ‘gods’ and by extension the kings as not governance, but an ‘organization to promote life, fertility, prosperity by transferring life from objects abounding in it to objects deficient in it’ (1936, 3). Aragon points to the ways that potency continues to fuel decentralised acts of prowess through the explicit deployment of ‘instrumental arts’ toward ‘efficacious power’ that strengthen local relationships (2022, 28). Povinelli (2016) discusses the important capture of life-giving water and minerals by stories that knit human persons through time into those potent life-giving elements of the dreamtime. Two Women Sitting Down might well be understood as a manganese

mountain that was enstoried as part of a communicative response that would ensconce it into an organised system directed toward fecundity, rendering it recognisable and valued to generations of human persons.

It is in and through this organised system of storytelling, I argue, that human prowess does its creative work.

Prowess

The interplay between peace and violence is a salient element of prowess. A person with prowess has an opportunistic edge aligned with ‘a destructive natural force’ that has an origin in ‘powerful places’ (Karttinen 2019, 186). ‘Founding violence’ is an element of prowess, but so is mediation and redistribution (Tambiah 1976; Wolters 1999, 29). Prowess is unmistakably connected with kingship (Day 2002; Wolters 1999), also with warriors and hunters (Simon 2012; Valeri 2000), as well as with shamans, healers and their non-human counterparts (Farrer 2014; Johnson 2020; Lutz 2022). But it is also present in colonial-industrial plantations and land control (Lutz 2022; Padwe 2020). Prowess is the capacity to tap potency and translate it toward particular ends.

Adhering in both peace and violence and resulting in both wealth (broadly defined) and power, prowess is always animated by potency (Baumann 2020; Karttinen 2019). But the stories about the relationship between potency and the animated individual shift through time. Paul Mus discusses how ‘divinization of the soil’, which is an act of prowess, gives rise to an entire pantheon of spirits and deities (Mus 1933, 11). Mus explicitly connects this to the formation of state power (15), which also intimately connects ‘spirit traditions’ to Brahmanic and Buddhist elements (Baumann 2020; Davis 2016; Tambiah 1970). In his treatment of the intimate connection between kings and monks, death and production, Erik Davis (2016) shows the ways that Buddhist monks and Khmer kings capture death and life respectively through acts of extraordinary prowess. The ascetic monk can control the energies of the earth and of the dead, while the violent king binds the rice to the people and the people to the king as he rebuilds the physical world. Benjamin Baumann unpacks a similar violent binding by teasing out the epistemological capture of the earth energies into Brahmanic and Buddhist logics, as well as their ‘domestication’ and binding through acts of extreme prowess into the pillars at the heart of the Thai *mueang* (2020, 47).

Emerging through encounters with potency, prowess is infinitely flexible. Tony Day (2002, 9) describes ‘self-Hinduizing’ men of prowess who appropriated and localised Indian notions of kingship through which they both retained and created claims to territories and their exclusive wealth. In his recent discussions of upland Jarai people in Cambodia, Jonathan Padwe (2020) shows the Jarai connecting themselves to a man of prowess in the slave-trading games of pre-colonial Southeast Asian states, which enabled the Jarai to become slavers rather than slaves. Prowess lies in the ability to flexibly shift skills, values and technologies to maintain access to potency, and by extension access to resources, status and political security (see, Chao 2020 for an excellent illustration of this). These shifts do not always maintain links to potency, however, and Johnson (2020) describes how the exceptional and transgressive prowess of upstream dam builders disrupts the prowess of a once-powerful island god and the abundant fish that used to make a living around the island on the Mekong River.

Examining an older capitalist frontier and the interactions of sentient and mechanical world stories, Sumatran and European respectively, Barbara Andaya (1993), shows how both sides were weakened in the encounter. The market emerged victorious and market prowess explains the outcome (Day 2002, 14). Any quick look at contemporary Sumatra in the throes of the palm oil market, or Cambodia and Vietnam amid the cassava boom, reveals denuded potency amid market prowess (Li and Semedi 2021; Mahanty 2022). Nonetheless, the market is a potent interlocutor, and the ways that market logics transform and limit economic possibilities makes flexibility and creativity crucial elements in acts of life-enhancing prowess. The Jarai are pragmatic capitalists at Cambodia's extraction frontier, transforming their animated forest toward cashew production (Padwe 2011), and Khmu in Laos have readily established cash crops on the side of a once powerful mountain, whose potency was depleted by state road-building prowess (Lutz 2022, 112; see also, Sprenger 2018 on Khmu cash cropping). Sentient world and mechanical world extraction have similar logics, which I suggest hinge on resource access, status and political security, but have vastly different effects on their potent base.

One of the 'men of prowess' in the story to be recounted below was able to mediate, to be accessible, to keep the peace and to mobilise disparate groups (Anderson 1990; Wolters 1999, 29), the other created transformative moments through transgression, violence and the disavowal of kinship relationships (Day 2002; Sahlins 2008; Wolters 1999). Both of these are effective methods to tap potency and turn it toward particular ends. Indigenous rituals associated with resource capture, production and healing are all acts of prowess that attempt to turn life-giving potency toward a desired end. That potency is always illusive, but until the 'modern' era humans understood it as an enlivened force that one can tap and gather with exemplary prowess, and one that dissipates through self-serving ends. The power of the market amid the weakening of the forest as a source of life-giving potency may cast doubt upon the proposition that earth energies act in the world. 'Neak ta are not as strong today as they were before, today money and the machines are stronger'.⁴ This Indigenous youth, influenced by NGO staff trained by development donors and conservation organisations, misrecognises the disintegration of forest potency as the 'loss of spirit strength' while acknowledging the growing strength of industrialised markets. He adopts a mechanical-world description of potency as a *thing in* a world populated by uniquely sentient humans, rather than an animated force that fuels prowess, accumulating and disintegrating under particular practical situations. The exploration of potency will be picked up in the closing section, the next section introduces the ethnographic foundation of this theoretical intervention.

Men of Prowess

At the eastern edge of the Prey Lang Forest on the west bank of the Mekong River in Kratie and Steung Treng provinces, numerous powerful forces entangle the human inhabitants in their ongoing projects of social reproduction. Kuy residents of Prey Lang claim prowess as ancient iron forgers and builders of pre-Angkorian temples (Pryce et al. 2014). The stories they tell of the past few hundred years consist of hunting, gathering, swidden and wet rice livelihoods, all practiced within the political economy of enstoried earth energies that is distinct from, but tangled with the dominant Khmer population (Keating 2012; Swift and Cock 2015). The Kuy were also preyed upon

to be pre-colonial slaves, post-colonial soldiers and most recently the slaves needed to fuel the 'modern' cash economies through market crop production and wage labour. The timeline of concern for this story follows global development as it began to wash again over the fields and forests of Cambodia in the 1990s. Some Kuy men were soldiers, most were subsistence swidden farmers, fishers and hunters living off the abundant forest ignored by socialist economies.

This section describes practical flexibility in the face of making a living, which Kuy history demonstrates, and especially the prowess that emerges in the context of capital accumulation. The forest is huge, and the actants involved are many. In this section, I describe the humans, whom I first encountered in 2014 fighting against the illegal loggers in the Prey Lang Forest and the timber plantation masquerading as a forest restoration project (Scheidel and Work 2018). The actions of two men, in particular, help me describe the kinds of prowess deployed to engage *effectively* with the potent flows of life-giving resources between the forest and the global market.

At the resource frontier, market potency can be understood through its awe-inspiring violence. The point of departure is the forest concessions in Cambodia, instituted as one of the first steps in the making of a neoliberal state (Cock 2016; Work, Theilade, and Thuon 2022). People who lived in the forest during this era describe the violence of industrial timber extraction as far exceeding the civil skirmishes and predatory extraction that helped fuel factional fighting during the post Khmer Rouge years (Le Billon 2002). The more violent form of market extraction, however, brought with it the opportunity for villagers to also capture bits of forest potency and use these bits to tap the potent market. The techniques used by the two men I describe help illuminate the traditionally recognised shape that prowess takes and the ways that it fluctuates between enactments of magical, meritorious, or ascetic power, as well as manifestations of brute force, norm-defying violence and excess. One man embodies a kind of 'insurgent masculinity' (Day 2002, 272), with a military background, a blustering personality, stocky build and loud voice. He has proven capable of performing 'crimes against common morality' that are well known for effectively tapping potency (Graeber and Sahlin 2017, 277; see also Anderson 1990, 25). The other takes the role of smooth mediator who was a monk in his younger years. His family has ties to monks that wield the ancient magic, and his reading and writing skills position him as an access point between community members and authorities or organisations. Acetic, scholarly practice, meditation and mediation are also effective tools for tapping potency.

What interests me here is the way that these two men of local-level prowess have been able, through time, to remain entangled with the shifting nodes of potency. Their continued access to the flow of life-giving energies required connections with the rituals and practice of traditional prowess that aligned with the interests of fellow villagers. They used this access to tap into the accumulating potency of market forces, and through this to create connections of another sort. Both found access to cash and flows of influence outside the village that disconnected them from local interests but attached local interests to outside prowess. In this way, both men maintained access to resources, social status and political security, even as propositions about the world shifted toward market-based prowess.

The Human Actors: Orm and Tian

Orm, the soldier, instigated a business relationship with the Everbright Timber company in 1995, which had cleared a road from the Mekong River, through his village and swidden fallows and into the old-growth Prey Lang Forest. He and Tian, the former monk, organised a workgroup to harvest luxury species to sell to the company, making use of their complementary literacies: Tian's long history collecting resin and walking through the forest made him sensitive to tree varieties and their locations in the forest. Orm's background in forest-based warfare kept them a safe distance from other timber-harvesting soldiers and company spies. Orm is unashamed of their entanglement with industrial timber, saying, 'the company paid cash. Out here, there was no way to get cash and by working with the company we could do that. Then, we had the advantage'. Tian describes this extraction as 'small', constrained as it was by their hand tools and oxen. 'We could never take the big trees like the company did with their machines. Just one at a time and only as big as the buffalo could drag out. We also used O'krak [a stream] in the rainy season, riding the tree back to the village'.⁵

Both men report how timber company excesses caused them to join with the Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN), a locally initiated militia-like group who patrolled the forest, confronting loggers and burning their timber. Men from the four provinces across which Prey Lang spreads collaborated as forest advocates and won a reputation for their prowess against the potent forces of market extraction. When the anarchy of forest concessions gave way to concessions for industrial agriculture, PLCN was also active in protesting those activities and organising villagers against corporate land grabs (Titthara 2011). In their home province, both 'men of prowess' were instrumental in fighting against a forest restoration project that started operations in 2012. Over time, however, the two became entangled with the operation and began to profit alongside the company as it 'reforested' the natural forest with timber plantation and extracted luxury timber beyond concession boundaries.

Orm and Tian initially tapped the potent timber industry to gain access to the elusive commodity of cash and the powerful people who wield it. Then, seeing the destruction and following both the dismay of their neighbours and the rumblings of collective organising, both men joined with the PLCN. Tian, the former monk, claims to have been part of the original PLCN organising force. Such a claim is significant as an act of prowess but is uncorroborated. Nonetheless the shifting flows of power at that historical moment, when the communities indigenous to the forest banded together to confront industrial extraction, drew in men of prowess from many locations including the two in this place.

Tian is the self-proclaimed instigator of activist organising and was also the first to demonstrate unmistakably that he sided with the company against local activism in 2017. Tian was never openly accused, but when elections for the provincial leader of PLCN came around Tian lost to his nephew. He remained a member and created difficulties for his nephew by hoarding patrol equipment donated by NGOs and trying to gather factional support among other members. At this time, Orm dropped out with the stated reason of factionalism in the network, beyond the scope of this discussion, but the company was also losing power.

The reasons for the company's eventual demise are unknown, but community-mapped resin tree forests and swidden fields within the concession, the company's

continued inability to procure approval for their Environmental Impact Assessment, and difficulties with government demands for timber laundering probably all played a part (Scheidel and Work 2018; Work, Theilade, and Thuon 2022). As the balance of power in the region shifted, so did Tian's capacity for prowess. When funds from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) began to flow into the establishment of Prey Lang as a 'Wildlife Sanctuary', Tian and Orm both sent their sons for ranger training with the now well-funded Ministry of Environment (MoE). Orm continued his involvement in activist missions, but in a more limited capacity providing information for activists about company activities and illegal logging syndicates. Activists assumed without evidence that he had access to this information because he was involved with the company, but his consistently accurate intel secured his status.

In the wake of the first forest restoration company's decline, another company with deep ties to Cambodia's logging elite took over the concession. Coinciding with this change in ownership, USAID established a new conservation project in the region after a year's hiatus, and Orm went public as a company man of prowess.

In this new capacity, Orm leveraged norm-destroying violence along with his deep knowledge of the forest and of the local resin tappers to locate high-value trees within the company boundary. The majority of these were resin trees that had been nominally protected and avoided because of their connection to Indigenous livelihoods. Under the new company's strategy, harvesting these resin trees removed local claims to the forest inside their concession in addition to producing revenue. Orm's job was to locate the trees and their Kuy masters, whom he knew well through his years of community activism, and to threaten and intimidate them into selling their trees. There were no reports of physical violence against persons, but the violence against trees was swift and at the time of this writing the company has processed thousands of locally used resin trees, both those inside the company boundary and outside it, in the protected forest.

The turf wars between ministries in Cambodia involve their own 'big men' that are beyond the scope here, but it is significant that the forest restoration company is managed under the jurisdiction of the Forest Administration (FA) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF). In the shifting and heterogeneous field of power where the Prey Lang Forest meets the Mekong River, despite MoE control of the vast Prey Lang Forest and the backing of USAID, the FA had control of this now well-connected company and retained control of an unusually large community forest adjacent to the protected area. This community forest holds rich forest resources as well as the remains of pre-Angkorian temples and is highly valued by villagers. While Tian was still a forest activist, he was a deputy in control of this forest until a highly secretive and controversial vote took place in 2016 that ousted the leaders in favour of others more willing to extract the valuable timber. After the company changed hands, another election for community forest officials took place according to the five-year schedule. Tian is again the deputy in charge of the community forest, and now both Orm and Tian work with the FA and the high-level Cambodian logging syndicate (GI 2021; GW 2007; Milne 2015; Work, Theilade, and Thuon 2022).

Valuable timber is easily visible as it moves from the community forest to the company's trucks, as are the roads the company cleared into the protected forest. There can be no mistaking the efficacious prowess of the company and the high-level

entrepreneurs currently removing all viable trees from the protected area. Two new interlocutors entered the protected area in 2022, mining companies with rights to mine one of the two limestone karst landscapes adjacent to the company and the community forest and the marble slab that sits between them. Before extraction can begin the surrounding forest must be cleared. As of this writing, the marble is experiencing forced migration into the global market, but the limestone remains untouched. Timber also flows as the company builds extraction infrastructure in the forest. All of these entities, the activists, the local collaborators, the timber syndicate, the mining company and the conservation project, are products of the global market, without which all of their activities would be meaningless.

The Non-Human Actors: Fire, Microbe, Tree and Karst

Entangled in this story of prowess are the potent energies of the earth. The preceding section showed how forest energy fuels timber companies, local activists, local extraction and international conservation. This section gives space to discuss earth energy as more than a passive recipient of the market's violent extraction. There is fire, there are microbes in two registers, there is an ancient tree that refuses to migrate to the market, and there is the Blue Dragon King (*neak ta sdech nag khiev*) one of two limestone karst landscapes that communicate through dreams and local bodies. The ancestors of marble slab and the second karst (*neak ta kambao chrong*) have not spoken since the mining began in mid-2022, but the Blue Dragon King put forward a potent threat that is not yet realised. Telling this part of the story situates the sentient world in the story in ways that reflect the interpretations of my local indigenous colleagues, capitalists all.

First, the fire. When Cambodia's logging elite took over the fictional forest restoration company in 2019. The first potent visitor was fire. Over half of the acacia trees planted by the previous company burned in an uncontrollable fire, whose cause the company owner attributed to poor weeding, a dry season and the local practice of 'slash-and-burn' agriculture, also known as swidden or shifting cultivation (Dove 2015; Dressler, Smith, and Montefrio 2018).⁶ Locals hostile to the company at that time said that the fire means that *lok ta*, the ancient one, does not support the new management.⁷ This type of 'accident' is a common sign of ancestral disapproval and, as with most of the potent entanglements I describe here, can be explained in the registers of either mechanical or sentient world epistemologies (see also, Evans-Pritchard 1976; Herrera and César 2018; McCann and Hsu 2014).

The next potent interference to the company's ability to 'develop' their concession comes in the form of microbes. First the company owner, then his wife, and then Orm have all succumbed to incurable illnesses. At the time of this writing all illnesses still linger, but I will discuss only Orm's in detail. When Orm threatened local 'owners' of resin trees, only a few agreed to sell. Local resistance was strong, but after a few months the company went in and aggressively cut as many trees as possible (RFA 2019). Orm fell ill immediately after this, and within a week, he was in the capital city in the hospital. He stayed there for six weeks and returned with the lingering symptoms of an illness that attacked his nervous system, causing chronic pain and limited mobility. He reports visiting three hospitals and spending over \$4000 USD. When I half-jokingly asked if he had questioned *lok ta* about the source of this mysterious

illness, he just glared while others laughed and chided.⁸ Even in a capitalist environment, and those snickering locals are deeply engaged in their own acts of capital accumulation, the ‘causal relations’ between non-human agencies and species management remain part of ‘the reality that can be thought’, and thus recognised when it happens (Bourdieu 1999, 55; Herrera and César 2018, 6; Strathern 1988).

Shortly after that last meeting, a much more potent pandemic-scale manifestation of viral prowess unleashed a terrific outpouring of fears, speculations and actions. One act of exceptional prowess in the virus-induced reality (reported globally), was for aggressive resource extractors to fill the space emptied of humans by government decree. In Prey Lang, the company sent their workers and hired local villagers to enter the protected area and cut, ‘as many big trees as possible’.⁹ When researchers entered the forest in April 2021, they found thousands of cut trees lying whole on the forest floor and were told they were waiting for the company’s truck to come pick them up. Of those thousands, there was one tree that called the exception and remained lying whole on the forest floor.

Two photographs circulated during that April field trip.¹⁰ The first shows the company manager, an FA staffer, an MoE forest ranger, the head of the community forest, another former forest activist and Tian standing on the stump of that very old, very large tree. Despite having the appropriate equipment, the company was unable to lift this tree into their truck. The second photograph shows the offerings, chicken, beer, tobacco, betel and incense that attest to the ceremony performed to ask the tree to get into the truck. That tree did not agree and remained in its place, collecting incense and offerings from the Indigenous capitalists that extracted viable trees around it.

Depending on who does the asking, and under what circumstances the question is posed, the actors photographed (and any random Kuy capitalist at the extraction frontier) will offer a variety of answers to the question of non-human agency. In the face of obvious tree agency, each of those Indigenous capitalists were forced into the social form that ritually negotiates power relationships with non-human agents (Bell 1992). This ritual negotiation of social relations is part of the ongoing work of making a living in the forest *and* at the extraction frontier, and annual village celebrations for the ancestral agents of the landscape continue into the present. Special event-based ceremonies also continue, like the one performed for the recalcitrant tree and at the karst landscape in honour of the Ministry of Environment’s eco-tourism project to ‘enhance forest livelihoods’.

At the end of 2021, there was a ritual in which a pig was slaughtered and wine shared in the forest at the karst of the powerful Blue Dragon King that communicates to local residents through dreams and through possessing (riding) bodies. This ancient one, like many others, also rides a tiger. From the tiger’s lair in the western most cave of the karst, music is regularly heard in the absence of players, tiger prints are regularly seen in the absence of wild tigers, and Buddha statues protect and sanctify the space. Here, during the celebration to inform the karst of the coming eco-tourism project and declare the good intentions of the human actors, two things happened. First, in the early morning when villagers went to prepare the site, they saw tiger prints. Second, the karst ‘rode’ a woman who came with the provincial authorities during the celebration and used her body to speak. It said, ‘you can have your eco-tourism spot for three years, you can build your road. If anyone touches the rock here, there will be

trouble'. This is not 'outwitting spirits', a view made possible by analysing Indigenous actions through the theoretical lens of dead white men (Kleinod, Duile, and Antweiler 2022). Nor is it communicating something into being (Sprenger 2017). This communication was initiated by earth energies in the context of ritualised and strategic negotiations with those potent forces. The field of potency-tapping actors and technologies has, however, expanded. In a later dream, the Blue Dragon King hinted that many ancient ones recently displaced by development in the Prey Lang landscape will be gathering forces with the karst. People are waiting and watching.

The performance of these two ceremonies, one for the tree and one for the karst, can be understood as part of the intersubjective relations that are typical of animist ways of engaging with the world. This engagement does not disavow capitalist relations, nor have capitalist transformations of the landscape been able to fully cover over enactments of chthonic energy, as each of these stories attests. As the landscape transforms through the prowess of powerful actants, the life-giving qualities of elemental energies also change, which changes the social relationships with them. The means of human subsistence in this remote area now come almost exclusively from the market, the nearby forest is emptied of fish and game, the trees have been consumed by the company, local swidden landscapes are almost fully transformed into cashew and cassava production, and the intensive illegal logging curtails local foraging.

In the context of extractive destruction in the potent forest, we can recognise the 'uncommons' described by de la Cadena (2018), within which divergent entities (karst and capitalist, for example) have interests in common that are not the same interest. The capitalist wants an ecotourism spot and a mine, the karst wants to remain in the region, and the profoundly flexible and practical characteristics of animism accommodate both (Sprenger 2016), while exposing the now ubiquitous instability of claims to ontological certainty. The amoral power of chthonic energies and the prowess required to engage them remains marked in this location by long-standing ideas and experiences through which self-serving prowess thwarts potency's enlivening force. At this historical moment of transition, the landscape continues to behave just as the 'primitive' people said it would, manifesting refusal with fire, illness and direct communication. Even though one can describe all these events using the language of machine-world epistemologies, virus, slash-and-burn accidents and superstition, the physical dissipation of potency in the region is the same.

Yearly visits since 2014 reveal once-full streams now dry, crops once easy to grow needing chemical fertiliser due to both overproduction and a lack of animal dung and biomass, human bodies once strong are sick and weak, wages remain scarce and the drought-storm-flood cycle intensifies yearly. The company continues to make money, new companies mining stone and gold are also making money, but potency dissipates.

Emplacing Potency

So, what of the ontological turn and the classificatory cacophony it spawns? Humans are legendary storytellers but stories can obscure the fecundity that makes them possible. This is not politically neutral (Blaser 2019) and propositions that destabilise conceptual orders both reveal and give rise to ghosts and monsters (Tsing et al. 2017). The ethnography put forward here confirms Indigenous (and academic) claims that an animated

earth acts in the world, but only if one ascribes to those propositions. If one does not, there are other ways of explaining what is going on, as if belief and the stories we tell about the world cause the world to act in particular ways (see, Hedrick 2023 for a nice discussion of belief in this context). I suggest that the world is acting, the humans and their stories are also acting and (obviously) the physical results of these interactions create palpably different worlds according to the propositions held by human actors. My Kuy colleagues regularly attest to this as they echo important critiques of essentialism and elite academic privilege that point to their persistent poverty, marginalisation, the simultaneous devaluing and cooptation of Indigenous knowledge (Bessire and Bond 2014; Todd 2016), even as the UN recognises Indigenous ‘rights’ and academics like me sing Indigenous songs to the world.

The ethnography I share here tries to keep the ruptured landscape visible, and the social divisions that make it possible, while working to dissolve the classificatory boundaries between lineage, kin, life and non-life that support the carnage (Baumann 2022; Chao 2020; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Haraway 2016). There are some concepts being put forward amid the pre, new and post manifestations of this turn, however, that can ‘enable things to change in order to remain the same’ through the process of de- and re-attachment to/from dominant propositions (Mignolo 2021, 510, 435). Mignolo posits a feedback loop of de- and re-linking that can be disrupted by a third, Decoloniality. I suggest that stronger disruption may come from Potency, without which ‘the preservation of life’ and rebuilding our fractured communities will be impossible (435). The erasure and misrecognition of potency is an effect of colonisation during which time kin-death and fractured communities were already in play. The kings and their priests knew potency (Anderson 1990; Asad 2003; Davis 2016; Wiener 1995), and everyone understood that it fuelled both the king and the grain. The kings, in fact, used sentient-world propositions to set the precedent for transgressive, self-serving prowess that supported social hierarchies of access and privilege (Baumann 2020; Sahllins 2017; Work 2022a). The transgressions of kingly accumulation and exclusion were violently de-linked from their backwards sentient-world origins by colonial concepts about religion and politics (McCutcheon 1997; McGuire 2007), and cunningly re-linked to machine world possibilities.

Decolonising risks leaving transgressive prowess in place as a concept that slips past the de- re- feedback loop. This slipping past is evidenced in a recent piece addressing an ‘epistemic rift between “economy” and “culture”’ caused by the ontological turn in anthropology (Kleinod, Duile, and Antweiler 2022, 127). The authors put forward Indigenous capitalists in Laos and Indonesia as evidence for this rift, showing how Indigenous animism functions perfectly well at the capitalist resource frontier. This in some ways sounds like my own argument, except that they make a feedback loop by suggesting that the ‘alterity project’ of the ontological turn ignores ‘practical, metabolic relations to nature’ (133). This academic move brings ‘animism’ and a mechanical thing in the world called ‘nature’ into being together at the resource frontier. The authors want to bring ‘animism’ as a ‘belief’ into its full ‘political-ecological significance’ (128), and de-link it from backwardness but re-link it to ‘nature’ and further to psychologically informed Frankfurt School theories of ritual and sacrifice. By focusing on the mind of the animist, ‘animist sacrifice’ transforms from a communicative event of respect and caretaking (Work 2022b), into a strategy to ‘outwit’ animating potency and ‘secure

survival ... at the capitalist frontier' (166). Transgressive prowess slips unremarked into the 'animist sacrifice' as does the diminishing potency at the capitalist frontier.

This work of de-linking 'animist' practices from backwardness only to re-link them to machine-world logics appears also in the 'plural ecologies' framework (Duile et al. 2023; Sprenger and Großmann 2018), which misrecognises prowess for potency in a similar, but different register than Anderson who conflated the two. 'Plural ecologies' proposes that 'ecologies' be understood as a 'more or less coherent set of relationships between humans and non-humans' (Sprenger and Großmann 2018: ix). The authors suggest, with clarity, that prowess-enhancing practices have never been static and that the creation of what Blaser (2019, 84) calls 'emplaced collectives' is in a constant state of flux. Useful and creative, this is consistent with my own experiences hanging out with 'animists'.¹¹

The 'plural ecology' exists, however, as a thing that emerges out of a set of relationships. This is larger than Anderson's description of 'western' power as relationships between humans (1990, 15), but it also ignores potency's foundational animation. Ecologies, as a set of relationships, 'recognize beings ... or even deny their existence' (Sprenger and Großmann 2018:ix; see also, Sprenger et al. 2023, 13). In this conception we have a non-actant, an ecology that comes into being through relationships, and then like Durkheim's collective consciousness or Marx's super-structure recognises or denies the existence of other actants. The non-human is silenced, as is the potency that animates the relations, and communication is confined to 'ritual action' (Sprenger 2018, 268).

This is not at all the situation in the animated landscapes in Cambodia, which are constantly initiating conversations through dreams, illness and possessing (riding) individuals outside of ritual. Some of these events were discussed above and it is important to note that the differences here are not of location or culture, it is not about Kuy or Jru culture, it is about academic propositions. I call attention here to processes through which recognition (of the 'plural ecologies' of a 'new animism', for example) can ignite the feedback system in a declared effort to de-link, but which can actually re-link the truth claims of marginalised communities to the dominant propositions (see, Povinelli 2002; and Asad 2003 for complementary discussions of this processes).

The violence of plural landscapes that I describe above is framed as 'situations of conflict' (Sprenger and Großmann 2018: xiv), in which 'economic change runs parallel to religious change, as the ontological status of beings shifts from immanence and personhood to transcendence and object' (Sprenger 2018, 264). Such statements de-link 'animist' relations from what Mus calls the 'fecund energies of the soil' (1933, 11) by pointedly ignoring the physical transformations of the land itself in favour of attention to transformations of personhood and disembodied 'economic change'. The ways that coffee production, industrial mines and hydropower dams transform all economic possibilities toward market objectives (Delang, Toro, and Charlet-Phommachanh 2013), gets buried by a 'new' animism with transcendent objects that can slide only slightly changed into market relations.

It is in just such an environment of once rich forest transformed by the objectives of global market prowess that the classificatory anomaly of Indigenous capitalism and the men of prowess it created confronted me. What I am pointing to here is that the material world is doing exactly what both sets of stories say of it. It produces material wealth and power for those who capture and hoard. It also destroys health and crops and

impoverishes the majority of residents in the violent landscapes of the resource frontier. Regardless of which set of stories one adopts, the recently-abundant forest region is dying and its people are suffering.

Conclusion

Potency fuels prowess. It is alternately violent and benevolent in indeterminate ways that are enstoried and passed through generations with ritualised technologies through which to tap it. One can use machine-world or sentient-world propositions to explain this process. Tapping the potency of the deep forest in a sentient world, for example, requires ascetic practices like abstinence from sex or alcohol and/or rites of excess like feasting or dancing that both include communicative acts consistent with sentient world propositions, like promises to take only what is needed and prayers for protection and gratitude. Tapping the same deep forest in a machine world consists of complex rituals between enslaved humans and animals in the mines, factories, or labs where the metals, machines and malaria drugs are produced. It also consists of communicative acts consistent with machine world propositions, like guarantees of funding from banks and investors, contracts for land use from governing bodies, and laws outlining the terms of access. The rituals and skills necessary for each enactment of prowess are different, the potent base is the same. The worlds that each creates deserve attention.

What exactly the tree, the karst and the microbes in the above ethnography are doing depends entirely on one's epistemological position. When locals claimed that *neak ta* was causing the drought plaguing their village newly cut from the Prey Lang Forest in 2018, a travelling salesman (who joined our group discussion uninvited) declared, 'that's not *neak ta*, that's nature'. In support of the villagers' claim I suggested that one man's ancestor is another man's nature. Everyone but the salesman laughed. The propositional hinges we use to join together other concepts about the everyday world do indeed make that world. The illnesses resulting from extreme extraction might be 'cured' through multiple visits to a medical practitioner engaging a complex collection of rituals and skills. Does this mean that the illness and the tree are not connected? Only if there is no such concept as transgressive prowess, which initiates potency's disintegration in the afflicted body. This highlights some issues of ontology, of reality, and of the profoundly political nature of this discussion.

A world in which the karst speaks and declares itself to be unavailable for market extraction is a palpably different world than one in which mining or not mining the karst depends on government contracts and machinery. We do live in different worlds. This is the foundation of the 'ontological turn'. The extent to which talking karst as a proposition about the world is de-linked from superstition, however (Povinelli 2016), only to be re-linked to euro-theoretical truth claims (Kleinod, Duile, and Antweiler 2022), exposes talking karst as an emergent concept in the changing social reality.

The intimacy between sentient-world and mechanical-world existences makes their mutual misrecognition possible as the latter consumes the former through market-centred extraction. A silent world is impossible for an Indigenous Kuy, even though once noisy places have been silenced. The non-accumulation of capital by Indigenous Kuy seems also to be impossible if they are to continue drawing breath and raising children. Maintaining access to resources, to status and to politically advantageous

connections remain the ‘hinges’ around which all their other epistemic propositions revolve. If one needs money to get these things, one finds money.

The preceding pages explored the interactions between potency and the prowess required to tap it. By attending to potency and prowess as an inseparable dyad, I suggest we can sidestep the question of how many worlds there are and disrupt the feedback loop through which world-changing propositions are re-signified into projects that maintain the status quo. At the edge of the forest and the resource frontier, the only way to get money is directly from the energy of the earth. Timber, cash crops, wild animals, ancient ruins, gold, iron ... all these are perfectly viable sources of income. Indeed, the only viable sources. If one already has capital, rituals are necessary to make extraction ‘legal’. For those without capital, these rituals are impossible. The important point for the argument here is that with or without capital, with sentient world or mechanical world propositional hinges, the reactions from the potent, life-giving base are the same. People are sick all the time. Floods, droughts, fires, lack of fish and game, all plague my colleagues living in and around Prey Lang – in the rest of the world as well. After hundreds of years of using machine world propositions as ‘a rule of testing’, this essay tests them ‘by experience’ to find that the transgressive prowess they normalise causes potent disintegration.

Notes

1. The ethnographic incidents described here occurred mostly between 2018 and 2023. I also draw on data from earlier research in the region, which forms part of a long-term collaborative research relationship with Kuy members of the Prey Lang Community Network. We have traveled together through all regions of the forest collecting ethnographic, GIS and oral historical data on forest crimes, climate change, changing economies and traditional practices in Prey Lang since 2014. I come for research twice each year (except during covid lockdowns) and research continues with or without me. We share field notes and geo-data through an online database and have weekly discussions. All research was conducted in Khmer. Research has been funded by: The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) [grant number W 07.68.416] and the UK’s Department for International Development [grant number 07.68.416] (2014-17 Conflict and Cooperation in the Management of Climate Change (CCMCC) research programme); Council for American Overseas Research CAORC – RA-235021 (2017); Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), Taiwan MOST 108-2410-H-004-003-MY2 (2018-2020); MOST, Taiwan MOST 110-2410-H-004-147 (2021-22); East-West Center (2022); Wenner-Gren Gr, ERG-40 (2022-24); National Science and Technology Council, Taiwan: 111-2410-H-004-119 (2022-23); Approved by National Chengchi University Ethics board: 2019-20: NCCU-REC-201901-1004; 2021–24 NCCU-REC-202105-I033.
2. Interview, Feb. 2017 Kratie.
3. The extent to which this proposition about unique human sentience is tangled in seventeenth-century European anxieties about scientific experiments, sovereignty, religion, magic and property will not be unpacked here (see, Asad 2003; Bauman 2023; White 1967), but these are foundational to the extractive economy, Indigenous capitalists and the propositions that make things natural or ‘supernatural’.
4. Interview, activist youth 27, Kratie province Jan 2023.
5. Words from both men recorded in fieldnotes taken February 2016, Kratie.
6. Interview, company manager, June 2018; community activist, July 2019.
7. Group Discussion, June 2019.
8. Fieldnotes, Jan 2020.

9. Interview with local logger, April 2020.
10. not provided to maintain anonymity.
11. Who despite their entanglement with capitalism continue to recognise the potential for agentive acts emerging from sentient land and water. This happens to a much lesser extent than it did 10 years ago, but also to a much greater extent than was predicted 100 years ago by the captains of industry, academics and bureaucracy.

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